EARLY FEMINIST TRADITIONS IN AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

The New Woman, Women's Colleges, and Katharine Susannah Prichard

When their feminist sisters overseas were busy breaking out of their Victorian chains, and a decade before English suffrage militancy, Australian women had already achieved the vote. Subsequently, the thematic, political, and aesthetic concerns of Australian feminist playwrights were different. Initially this chapter was planned as a 'before and after the vote' exploration of feminist traditions in Australian theatre, but such categorisations do not enable the same critical insights in analysing Australian theatre history as they do elsewhere. This is because the distinction between New Woman and suffrage theatre has less relevance, or a different meaning, in the Australian context than it does in either the British or American contexts. Australian feminist playwrights were confronting different dramatic frontiers, and it is this difference which distinguishes their work.

This 'uncategorised' chapter therefore presents a selective overview of Australian feminist theatre from 1890 to 1920, and considers how the theatre was used to promote women's agendas. Those agendas reflect both the diversity of Australian feminism and feminists, and the various ways in which women utilised the dramatic form to express those feminisms. The playwrights and organisations selected for discussion are meant to represent that diversity, but by no means do they provide a complete picture of feminist theatre during this period. Rather, aside from suggesting the richness of women's theatre history in Australia, they stand as examples of both difference and continuity within a broader international feminist theatre history. The examples chosen to provide an overview of that history are: Mrs E S Haviland's New Woman drama, *On Wheels*; various examples of conservative feminist theatre as it operated in women's colleges within Australian universities during the suffrage period; and the suffrage plays of Katharine Susannah Prichard.

CULTURAL ANXIETY AND THE NEW WOMAN PLAYWRIGHT

The New Woman of the 1890s was described by one poet as 'Pausing on the century's threshold/with her face towards the dawn'.[1] This poignant image of late nineteenth century feminism shows women to be full of tentative but determined hope. That hope was played out on the late nineteenth century stage in a genre referred to as New Woman drama. Complex issues were explored, all revolving around what was known as 'the New Woman question'. Linda Dowling suggests that To most late Victorians, the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent'.[2] This produced a certain level of cultural anxiety, especially when the New Woman as a subject made her way onto the stage. A specific Australian example of this genre, *On Wheels*, by Sydney playwright Mrs Haviland, demonstrates that just as Australasian women provided international feminist leadership in their campaigns for and achievement of suffrage, they also provided artistic and intellectual leadership for women's theatre. This has interesting ramifications for both Australian theatre historiography and international feminist dramatic criticism.

The New Woman and her theatre

What exactly was the New Woman? The term was reputedly first used by the radical novelist Sarah Grand in 1894. She was typically seen as young, middle-class, and single by choice. She liked to be educated, smoke, wear rational dress, and indulge in sports which had hitherto been closed to her. John Docker characterises the New Woman as 'a major contemporary "cultural figure" one who embodied feminist dream, desire and action', a view shared by many historians.[3]

At a century's distance the New Woman's insistence on her right to smoke or ride a bicycle may seem tame stuff, but these activities in fact represented significant victories over the acceptable norm of Victorian female behaviour where such things were considered to be subversive feminist acts. Haviland's play, as the title *On Wheels* suggests, uses the

---

[1] D B M, 'The New Woman', in Juliet Gardner (ed), *The New Woman*, London, 1993, p. 14.

[2] Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, no. 33, 1979, p. 436

[3] Docker, *The Nervous Nineties*, Melbourne, 991, p. 235.

bicycle as a metaphor for women's freedom, and dramatises the New Woman's delight in those victories. Some newspapers such as the *Sydney Mail* introduced serious reports of womens' cycling events and races held frequently all over Australia and New Zealand. More often than not, the iconography of the New Woman in the popular press and entertainment media presented her as a figure of ridicule. New Women retaliated and embraced similar strategies to argue out their feminist ideas; many chose the stage as an effective medium to do so.[4]

Despite a gradual change in the public attitudes towards the theatre as a profession this time last century, it was still generally considered to be a vulgar way for a woman to earn her living. Yet many New Women chose the theatre as a career, and were often radicalised by their profession. There was a sort of an 'after-the-dolls-house' syndrome operating at this time, whereby women who had seen, acted, and enjoyed Ibsen's roles for women could not now be satisfied with less. As Julie Holledge has noted, life 'post-Hedda' meant that women practitioners were now keenly aware of the tyranny that kept them in bit parts.[5] Writers, along with those performers and managers, were engaged in the feminist activism that was reforming the theatrical profession of the time. The New Woman playwright—generally considered to be the older sister of the suffrage playwright—emerged from this activism.

While some writers were inspired by Ibsen and Shaw and wrote women's roles which they believed gave women and actresses complexity and centrality, many playwrights capitalised on the thematic popularity of the New Women and used her as a figure of comic ridicule or tragic destiny—the profound irony in this being that many of the actresses playing these denigrating roles would themselves have been New Women.[6] As Viv Gardner notes, 'the most successful subversions came only when women went

---

[4] Judith L Stevens notes that the New Woman 'as a literary or dramatic character was not actually new or even indigenous to this period but had made many appearances in both fiction and drama', and that her presence has been documented, for example, in English drama from 1600 to 1730 by Jean Elizabeth Gagen (p.183). Stevens argues that the New Woman character had more freedom to defy 'the feminine stereotypical image' in drama than in literature: 'Why Marry? The "New Woman" of 1918', *Theatre Journal*, 34, 1982, p. 196.

[5] Holledge, *Innocent Flowers*, London, 1981, p. 36.

[6] According to Viv Gardner, 'It remained for the women writers...to combine the new ideas and ideology of the Woman Question with a grasp of the reality of the lives of contemporary women': 'Introduction', Gardner & Rutherford (eds), *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, London, 1992, p. 9.

outside the existing structures and created, however temporarily, their own theatre'.[7] Whether the New Woman as a character was used as a negative or positive symbol, or whether the play was written by a man or a woman, it is worth remembering that women had centre stage for this first time in modern theatre history, and they learnt how to exploit its power.[8]

On Wheels

Mrs E S Haviland lived in Sydney and wrote at least one play, *On Wheels*, a three-act comedy which was published in 1896.[9] Research to date has located no performance reviews, however the arguments involved in this investigation do not rely on the play having been performed. Set in the countryside, the plot revolves around Concord and Prudence, two daughters of a widowed rector, who along with his sister, Amanda, has a hard time raising young women in this day and age (1896). The sisters are the embodiment of the New Woman: they reject their Victorian upbringing; they desire a serious and useful education; they scorn love and marriage as they have witnessed it; and they yearn for financial independence in order to pursue a worthy life of their own choosing. This yearning leads them to enter a local bicycle race offering a large financial prize, which they hope will enable them to begin a new life. The plot is complicated by the arrival of a long lost uncle, Moggs, who woos and marries their Aunt Amanda. Not only is Moggs a thief impersonating a gentleman, and a bigamist being pursued by the police, 'he'

---

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[8] Just as it is necessary to acknowledge this, it is important to remember that recent feminist dramatic criticism has documented the failures of feminism in male playwrights who wrote about the New Woman. Jill Davis, for example, argues—using Shaw as a case study—that such male authored plays made the New Woman speak 'her master's voice' [22]. Davis goes on to say that 'the way in which progressive ideas and patriarchal reaction' combined in such plays produced very 'ambiguous' representations of the New Woman, whereby Shaw, for example, would only 'recognise feminist arguments to masculinist ends' [28]. Such New Woman characters, Davis argues, '...are not representations of women, but ciphers for a psychic strategy to achieve and protect masculinity' [31]: Jill Davis, 'The New Woman and the New Life', in Gardner & Rutherford, *op. cit.* Catherine Wiley also points out the failures of feminism in New Woman plays written by men, claiming for example that their dramatic creation of New Women were merely 'men in disguise': 'The matter with manners: the New Woman and the problem play', in James Redmond (ed), *Women in Theatre*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 119.

[9] I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my Grandmother, Doris Mardie Smith, who helped me unlock the mysteries of this text through transcribing 187 pages of 1896 (cyclostyled) longhand, which was how *On Wheels* was published in Sydney by C Haviland. All page references are to this publication (ML).

is in fact a 'she'. During the course of the action Moggs is a constant source of encouragement and support for the two sisters in their quests to become New Women.

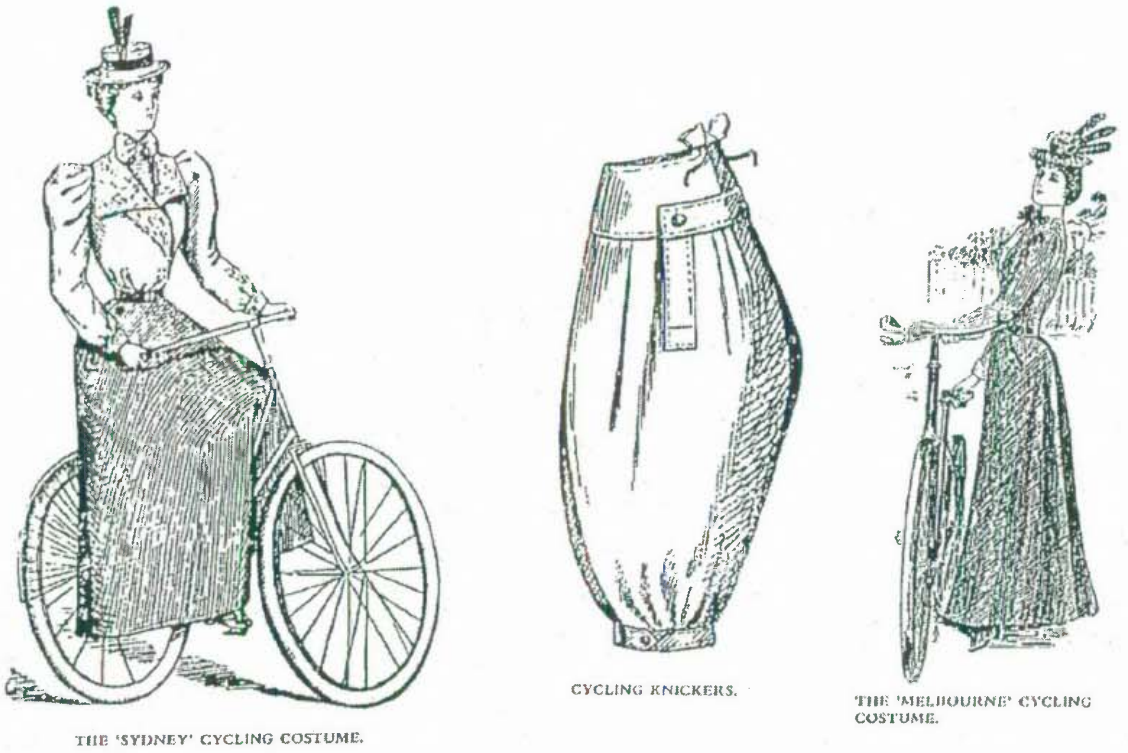

Figure 3.1 *Cycling Knickers worn with the Melbourne cycling costume (right), and the Sydney cycling costume (left), as advertised in the* Australian Home Journal *of 1898 (Mitchell Library).*

This is such a rich play—there are many things worth discussing—but I will consider two issues only: the theme of cycling, and the role of cross-dressing, which I will deal with first. My initial guess was that the audience would almost certainly have been aware that the actor playing Moggs was a woman, which is the usual case in cross-dressed characters. Two factors contradict this assumption. Firstly, the character is described as short and stocky, thickset, and the detailed costume list does not require her to wear

revealing clothing. This is uncommon as a women wearing men's tights on stage and showing off their 'beautiful' legs was often one of the dubious bonuses of the male impersonator. Haviland seems to have deliberately cast this cross-dressed character out of type. Secondly, from reading the play there is absolutely no clue or indication that the character is a female in disguise: it is a genuine shock at the play's end when the police burst in on Moggs' marriage to Amanda and arrest 'him' for bigamy. Much to the disappointment of his new wife's and the delight of the sisters, Moggs declares that 'Things h'aint so bad h'as they look' and tears off the beard and wig to reveal a woman's head and hair.

> ALL: A woman!
>
> AMANDA: I'm married to a woman. And an old woman [*shrieks*].
>
> MOGGS: [*making grimaces at her and striking an attitude*] No beautiful creature, A New Woman [68].

This is followed by a curtain, which is quickly raised for a chorus of the song 'My Bicycle and I', and marks the conclusion of the play.

What does this all mean? On one level, cross-dressing in this play is intended to attack the very core of gendered security in late nineteenth century Australia. Women living the life of men is popular 'mythology' of Australia in the 1890s, captured most notably in Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life*, first published in 1903. Folklore or truth, it has been a popular Australian literary and dramatic theme, surfacing most recently in Robyn Archer's 1994 play, *Poor Johanna*.[10] Perhaps Haviland, along with other writers, simply tapped into popular social knowledge about cross-dressing-and-living women, and dramatised that story in order to scrutinise gender systems. Regardless, the transgressive potential of the act of cross-dressing can not be underestimated.[11]

---

[10] The world premiere of this play was in July at the 1994 Third International Women Playwrights Conference, held in Adelaide.

[11] Jean E Howard, pointing out that the stage 'did not do its ideological work in a seamless manner', places her study of theatrical cross-dressing in relation to actual instances of cross-dressing in the London streets and 'in relation to the polemical controversy surrounding the "unnatural" mannishly attired woman'. Such a study would no doubt be most revealing in the Australian context as well, but as Howard goes on to say, such research would 'not "explain" theatrical cross-dressing in the sense of providing it with either an origin or a fixed meaning. That is, theatre and social practices can not simply be conflated. Nevertheless, I agree that 'taken together they tell us something about both class and gender struggles...and about the complex role of the stage in those struggles': *The Stage and Social Structure in Early Modern England*, London, 1994, pp. 93-4.

Taking this reading further, it would be possible to claim the play as an early example of lesbian or transsexual drama. The character Moggs after all has been living as a man and a husband to many women all over the country. It is worth noting that it was in the 1880s that Havelock Ellis, a male sexologist, studied female homosexuality, which had until that time been considered 'harmless'. His studies, according to Carol Smith-Rosenberg, redefined lesbians as being 'sexually perverted'. In doing so he 'transformed the New Woman [who rejected marriage] into a sexual anomaly and a political pariah'. Armed with such 'unimpeachable' scientific evidence, educators, politicians, and society launched campaigns against the New Woman. Female friendship came to be feared, and charges of lesbianism 'became a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers and educators—and the feminist...institutions they had founded'.[12] If *On Wheels* can be claimed as a lesbian text, then given these historical circumstances the play becomes an even more courageous piece of theatre for its time and place.

Many critics have commented on whether or not cross-dressing was really a liberation for women. Tracy Davis suggests that actresses doing male things on stage was not 'an entirely positive development', arguing that 'In complete contrast to the achievements of male cross-dressing...The cross-dressed actress did not have the opportunity to impersonate the other sex, but could only indicate her own'. Further, 'the female cross-dresser impersonated young, vital, and often heroic men in the prime of their life'.[13] As I've already noted, the character of Moggs seems to have been an exception to this observation: Moggs was a short, fat, smelly drunk. J S Bratton, discussing the politics of cross-dressing, warns against uncritically imposing feminist motivations on the practice of cross-dressing, arguing that in certain instances it is 'difficult to establish subversive or self-assertive intentions in the gender play of the popular stage at the turn of this century'.[14] The assumption of a feminist consciousness in operation does offer a way of intervening in historical cultural practices, however, one which is particularly appealing to feminist scholars. As Bratton and others have noted, the peak practice period of male

---

[12] C Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, New York, 1985, pp. 280-81.

[13] T C Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London, 1991, p. 75.

[14] J S Bratton, 'Irrational Dress' in Gardner & Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

impersonation and cross-dressing coincided neatly with the British suffrage movement.[15] Reading women's cultural practice within the larger women's movement of the suffrage period, intent as it was on destabilising female subjectivity, it is easy to assume that *On Wheels'* male impersonation belongs to a tradition of feminist theatrical subversion which was intent on asking difficult questions and offering radical solutions.

Peta Tait discusses cross-dressing in a more contemporary theatrical context. In her latest book *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Tait discusses cross-dressed subjectivities, and notes that audiences are required to deal with ambiguous subjectivities when gender is enacted in disconnection from the known body of a performer:

> Gender fluidity offers an intriguing, mysterious and perhaps dangerous edge to performance: a spectacle based on social prohibition. It invites the audience to unmask categories of gender as transmutable. Since it can be argued that masculine and feminine identity in society is performative, then theatre counterbalances the pressure of social conformity when it invites a performative transgression of social behaviours such as cross-gender enactment.[16]

The text of *On Wheels* suggests that these same issues in performance would have offered a transgressive space for the New Woman to confront social restraints of the time.

Basically, the New Woman was an emancipist. As Australian suffragist Catherine Helen Spence said 'I am a new woman and I know it. I mean an awakened woman...awakened to a sense of capacity and responsibility, not merely to the family and the household, but to the State'.[17] This is revealing because Spence, like most New Women, laid claim to their right to assume entry into a 'male' world. Perhaps the most relevant issue about cross-dressing in the case of *On Wheels* is exemplified in Smith-Rosenberg's discussion on how the New Woman accessed the symbolic order. Smith-Rosenberg argues that this access, dramatised by Moggs, exemplifies the way in which New Women writers entered male discourse in order to gain power. She points out that:

---

[15] See Bratton who notes that David Cheshire was 'the first to remark the temporal coincidence between male impersonation and suffrage agitation', *ib d.*, p. 90.

[16] Peta Tait, *Converging realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Sydney, 1994, p. 91.

[17] Spence quoted in Susan Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography of Catherine Helen Spence*, Sydney, 1985, p. 12.

> women's assumption of men's symbolic constructs involved women in a fundamental act of alienation...[because] In adopting a male symbolic system, rather than furthering their own unique discourse, feminist writers...may have come close to relinquishing a critical source of self-identity and political strength—the power to create language.[18]

Although a larger issue than can be properly addressed here, it is worth noting this criticism whilst evaluating the feminism of New Woman plays and playwrights. Has Haviland created a truly emancipated female character in Moggs? Or does the fact that Moggs adopted a 'male symbolic system' in order to be liberated seriously qualify the play's feminism?

Davis, criticising the role of eroticism in Victorian theatre, also touches on some qualms that I have about *On Wheels*. She notes that since its establishment theatre has incorporated the use of suggestive or revealing costumes as part of the operation of erotica. It follows then that women who rejected male ideas about how a woman should dress would be open to ridicule. The New Woman received plenty of this in the music halls: 'Independent women, rational dress reformers, and women's pretences to athleticism (especially on the newly invented bicycle) were constant sources of ridicule in erotica'.[19] All of those factors are present in *On Wheels*. Even if Moggs is exempt from this criticism, sisters Prue and Concord did their fair share of prancing around in revealing costumes, such as bicycle bloomers. Just as easily as I claim the play as feminist theatre, one could argue—given Davis' criteria—that *On Wheels* was one of those New Woman plays which denigrated the new female emancipation by being party to erotic displays of the female body. Those elements are there, just as there were undoubtably audiences members who read the play accordingly. It could also be argued that such audience members were oblivious or immune to the play's over-riding feminism,[20] which is forever

---

[18] Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

[19] T Davis, 'Sexual Language in Victorian Society and Theatre', *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol 6, no 4, 1989, p. 43.

[20] Many historians have noted the difficulty of assessing audience reception to feminist theatre. Discussing cross-dressed women in British music halls of the 1890s, J S Bratton, for example, acknowledges that such historical explorations involve 'attempting to read the subtext of the commentaries, and to understand audiences and performers only half-conscious of what is happening, and wholly unwilling to verbalise even what they do perceive': *op. cit.*, p. 89.

on the side of endorsing the political and personal philosophies of the New Woman, no matter in what guise.

There are many other feminist issues raised in the play: what constitutes female respectability at the turn of the century; what kind of life-option was marriage; the role of religion in patriarchal society; but the most constant theme was the link between the sport of cycling and women's autonomy. Endless contemporary sources circulated ideas claiming that bicycling had 'dire' effects on women's health. By 1896, opinions (even conservative and medical) had changed. Haviland, along with those reformed and advanced thinkers, advocated the bicycle in her play as a healthy pastime and an aid to independence for women of all classes. It was more than riding a bike; it was what women wore when they were riding bikes that caused most debate.

In *On Wheels* the Reverend forbids his daughters to ride bicycles. They disobey, enter the race dressed in bicycle bloomers, and win. They are found out, defend themselves successfully, with the help of Moggs and the bicycle triumphs as a symbol of feminist independence. That the women characters refuse to think of themselves as weak and incapable was true above all when they took up cycling; their cash prize rewarded them with financial independence and increased their life choices. Once a New Woman had worn a divided cycling skirt and enjoyed its freedom, there was no going back to corsets for the New Woman. The bicycle and its garb became the class and sex-levelling symbol of the decade, and was of especially great importance in women's emancipation. It was not by chance that in 1897 male students marching through Cambridge in celebration of the crushing defeat of women's attempts to be awarded degrees, carried in their victory parade an effigy of a New Woman riding her bicycle in knickerbockered rational dress.[21]

Denouement

Perhaps the greatest achievement of New Woman dramatists was in changing the dramatic structures of early modern drama with the dramaturgical innovation of moving the female character into prominence as the real subject of the play. As Jan McDonald says, this

---

[21] D Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, London, 1986, p. 203.

upgrading of women characters' dramat c status 'changed the structural pattern of the well-made play, and in so doing offered imp licit criticism of the conventional social order that earlier pieces upheld'.[22] Australian Ne w Women dramatists were engaged in that same enterprise, but the 'social order' that was being criticised was markedly different.

To summarise, I will pose two q uestions: what has the New Woman contributed to feminist theatre historiography, and wh t does, or could, the Australian example endow to that historiography? Australian theat e history has an obligation to furnish fresh perspectives of that important develop nent in early modern drama; but Australian New Woman drama is capable of more than simply adding more examples confirming what feminist theatre history already knows. The acknowledgment of Australian perspectives could very well reconstruct feminist the atre history itself, moving the contribution of early Australian feminist playwrights from the outer margins to the very centre of theatre history.

In 1993 New Zealand hosted a conference celebrating a centenary of women's suffrage, and their status as being the f rst nation in the world where women achieved the right to vote. What the conference di l by its very structure, was reverse the physical location of Antipodeans as being on the marg ns of western feminism by locating New Zealand at the centre of the momentum of waves of suffrage which stretched to the far corners of the world.[23] It made perfect sense, as most suffrage historians would agree: at the turn of last century, the rest of the world looked to Australia and New Zealand for inspiration, and the conference remir ded everyone of that. It follows that Australian feminist theatre history could very well tell a similar story, and contest a different place in the history of early modern theatre when Australian feminist theatre is taken into account. Given this premise, and as we pause c n the threshold of another century still hoping for new dawns, the significant silence abou t our early feminist practitioners in both Australian and international feminist theatre histo iography is a curious silence indeed.

---

[22] *Ibid*, p. 41.

[23] This information from Lyndall Ryan's repo rt, 'Suffrage and Beyond: Women's Suffrage Centenary Conference', Victoria University, Wellington, 27-9 August 1993', *Australian Feminist Studies*, no 19, Autumn 1994, pp. 179-184.

The history of women in Austra ia theatre is currently enjoying close scrutiny, and the results of that ongoing research will eventually make its way into the larger world history of women in theatre.[24] The illustration of how Australian New Woman playwrights can contribute to that inclusion, embodied in the example of Mrs E S Haviland, is summarised well by Concord in *On Wheels* who said, reflecting on the character Moggs and the New Woman in general, '...we really can't get on without you'.

FEMINISM, THEATRE, AND WOMEN'S COLLEGES

Education was of central concern to Victorian and Edwardian feminists. The New Woman was defined by her quest for independence, and the pursuit of education was integral to that quest. Levine notes that the new educational opportunities that became available for women during this period were a result of feminist organisation which saw education as the key to a broad range of other freedoms including employment.[25] Women's access to higher education enjoyed a longer history in England, and particularly in America where many new universities were privately funded. Australian women did not have the opportunity to attend university and reside in colleges until the early 1890s, and then only in Sydney and Melbourne.[26] The women who attended those colleges found their lives transformed by the experience, and seemed fully aware of their pioneering status and the associated privileges. Ann Larabee argues that women's colleges in America at the turn of the century were 'in a sense, theatres: special sheltered sites set apart for performance', and that any women student was 'in a position to project herself experimentally into a variety of transforming behaviours and to proclaim herself an instance of civilisation'.[27]

In this light, and considering the high levels of political activism pursued by women university students and graduates in America and England, it is not surprising that

---

[24] See for example any recent editions of *Australasian Drama Studies*, in particular the focus issue on women, vol 21, October 1992, and Peta Tait's *Original Women's Theatre*, Melbourne, 1993, and *Converging Realities, op. cit.*

[25] Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, London, 1987, p. 26.

[26] Admission of women to Australian universities during the suffrage period was as follows: Adelaide (1874); Melbourne (1880); and Sydney (1881). Space restrictions have allowed only certain Melbourne and Sydney examples to be explored, but Adelaide promises a fruitful research area considering that women were able to vote there in State elections as early as 1894.

[27] Ann Larabee, 'First Wave feminist theatre. 1890-1930', unpublished PhD thesis, State University of New York at Binghampton, 1988, p. 26.

these women experimented with and were transformed by theatre: 'As young women emerged from the women's colleges they brought with them a distinct notion that drama was an intricate part of social and political life'.[28] This often resulted in a feminist enterprise, but many conservative women went on to use the theatre as a vehicle for less revolutionary ends.[29] How important then, was university drama in women's colleges in Australia to the feminist theatre movement?

While there are clear examples of university feminists adapting college performance rituals to fuel political rebellion and argue for social reform, particularly in the suffrage and labour movements, this was the exception rather than the norm in Australia during this period. This could be explained by the simple fact that so few women attended university in the 1890s in Australia, hardly enough to gang together and march in the streets. Additionally, because South Australian women had achieved the vote in 1894, many feminists trusted that the other states would automatically follow. At least for the time being there was not much for feminists to be marching in the streets about. Further, the Federal vote was achieved in 1902 consequently feminist agendas explored through theatre in Australian women's colleges at this time were focussed if not on different issues, then on broader ones than the vote itself. The theatre was used for exploring feminist issues such as searching for an autonomous female voice, and establishing control of how women were represented in society and remembered in history. Through performance, women became engaged in restructuring the world around them, and projecting themselves as independent and intelligent. In so doing they dislodged traditional and restrictive definitions of gender in operation at this time in Australian history.

Sydney

The Women's College within the University of Sydney was founded in 1888 by an Act of Parliament, which took some three years to come into effect. The first students entered into residence in March 1892. These were the first women in Australia to commence formal

---

[28] *Ibid*, p. 52.

[29] *Ibid*. Larabee cites those examples of right wing women who utilised community theatres to promote patriotism, for example.

university studies. Even before the college was founded, theatre played an integral role in the life of the institution. Various theatrical performances were held in Sydney in order to raise monies for the proposed college. As this example from 1890 illustrates, the kind of entertainment provided was respectable traditional fare of extracts from Shakespeare and other English writers.

During its early years the Women's College had a tradition of the 'Fresher Play', one written and performed by new students. These plays were essentially for the entertainment of students and residents of the college, the subject matter including people, places and events with which that audience would have been familiar: 'They were just meant for fun and to show off the talents (or otherwise) of fellow students'.[30] Although these plays do not appear to be seriously concerned with political themes, they still include examples of satirical social and political commentary, that are quite revealing of the mindset of women university students of this period.

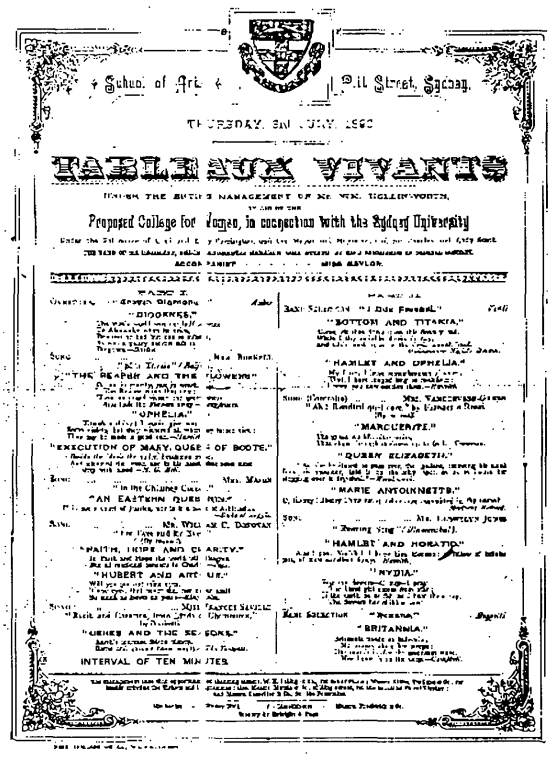

Figure 3.2 *Program from the 1890 fundraiser Tableaux Vivants (SUWC).*

[30] This information comes from private correspondence during 1993 with Dr Rosemary Annable, College Archivist at the Women's College, University of Sydney, to whom I would like to express my thanks.

Vere Irwin-Smith was a resident student in the College in 1913, and a non-resident student in 1914. The manuscript of her 1913 Fresher's Play, *Orrible Bellowdrama*, survives along with photos capturing the mood of the student performers. The play is a comical romp full of witty lines exploring such topics as romance, education, and trendy social habits such as smoking. Also amongst Irwin-Smith's papers is a humorous poem entitled 'On the occasion of Cicely and Kitty Moir putting their names on two rolls before the 1913 election and receiving a notice from the police about it', followed by another verse, 'From Cicely in gaol'.

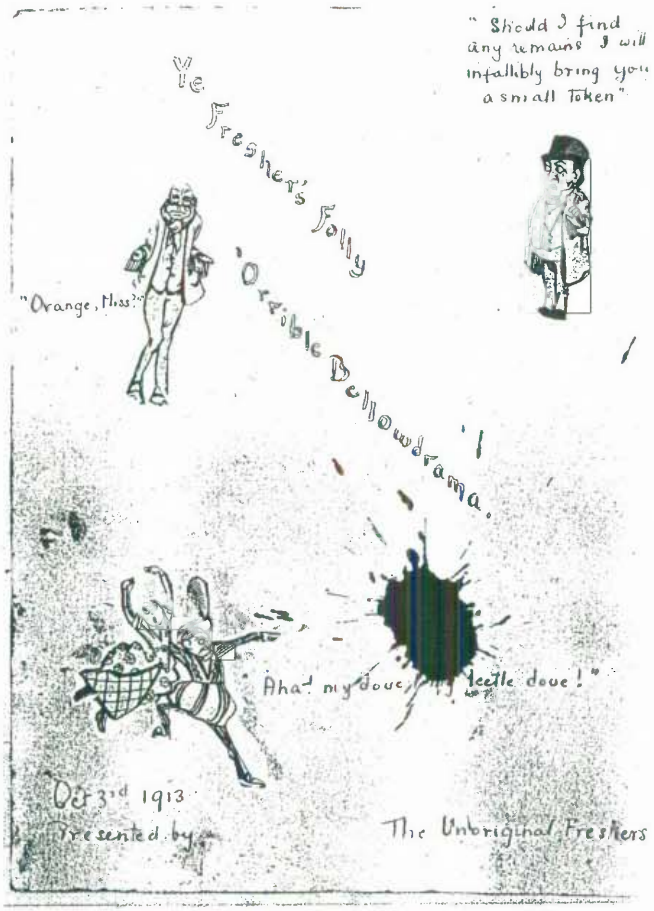

Figure 3.3 *Program cover from 1913 of Vere Irwin-Smith's* 'Orrible Bellowdrama, *(SUWC).*

Theatre was a popular pastime for the women students. The college magazine reveals that they performed everything from tableaux, to tragedies full of 'gloom', to operas (they even had their own opera company called the Freshello Opera Company).[31] This material warrants a fuller investigation, and offers some important insights into women's artistic and cultural enterprises from this period, but meanwhile serves in this chapter as an example of the variety of theatre activities that university women indulged in.

Theatrical activities at Sydney University were not confined to the Women's College. The Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) was established in 1889, growing to about 40 members within two years. They were very serious and would no doubt have scoffed at such theatrical antics as the Fresher Play. SUDS employed a dramatic coach and aimed to 'give dramatic performances as a means of developing the histrionic and rhetorical ability of its members'.[32] They chose to perform English classics and took few dramatic risks. The dramatic risk-taking at Sydney University during this period was happening at the Women's College. A clearer picture of subversive theatrical activities more associated with radical student sentiments emerges when considering the Women's College's excursion into pageantry in 1913.

To celebrate the Women's College's coming of age, the 21st anniversary of that auspicious beginning was honoured with the commissioning of a pageant. Designed by the first principal of the college, Louisa Macdonald, with the verses composed under her guidance by C J Brennan and J le Gay Brereton, *A Mask* was first performed in August 1913.[33] Miss Macdonald explained the decision to hold such a theatrical extravaganza in a forward to the 1913 program: 'It seemed fitting to mark the occasion [of the college's anniversary] not only as a festival of thanksgiving for the perils of youth safely passed, but also...to show to all...something of the reasons for its existence'.[34]

---

31 *The Magazine of The Women's College*, vol 4, October 1917 (SUWC).

32 Turney (et al), *Australia's First: A History of the University of Sydney*, Sydney, 1991, p. 324.

33 *A Mask* was subsequently revived in both 1932 and 1982. The text was published in the program on all occasions.

34 'Forward to Audience' from *A Mask* program, 22nd August 1913, (SUWC).

A Mask was described by those involved as being allegorical 'in the Elizabethan fashion', through which they hoped to 'show in symbol our hopes and aims'.[35] The cast consisted of two narrators and twenty six historical and mythical women. Characters portrayed included Joan of Arc, Mary Queen of Scots, Charlotte Corday, and Florence Nightingale. In the tradition of feminist pageantry so recently made famous by Cicely Hamilton's *A Pageant of Great Women* performed in London in 1909 to great acclaim, women theatre practitioners (and audiences) laid claim to their rich and varied historical heritage. The characters symbolised many things of importance to women in the contemporary audience, which was Macdonald's intention entirely.[36] Stowell's comments on feminist pageantry as used by English suffragettes offers some insights into how the audience and the actors may have viewed *A Mask*.

> Drawing upon history, mythology and moral allegory for primary matter...[pageants] were emblematic in method and didactic in intent, instructing viewers by encouraging them to contemplate heroic examples of what could be achieved. Such spectacles served not only as visual display of women's collective desire. .they also functioned as testaments to women's accomplishments...through their representations of famous women from all facets of history.[37]

As the designer of *A Mask* commented, the feminist message of their pageant was meant to be easily accessible and inspiring, dramatically stating that 'it is as well for the world at large as for the individual woman that in each and every woman all her faculties—and chiefly reason and will—should trained as carefully as may be'.[38] *A Mask* delivered this feminist message within a specific theatrical space, namely an institution which actively fostered those very ideals in young women.

If *A Mask* were reduced to two clear instructional messages, they would be as follows. Firstly, that women are women and that that is grand enough, as the greatest of all work in the world is done by women: as the character of a woman criminal put it of

---

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] In later years when the play was performed, Australians Caroline Chisholm and Dame Nellie Melba were added to the cast. This was a controversial decision, and enraged Macdonald. See correspondence (SUWC).

[37] Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992, p. 44.

[38] *A Mask* program, *op. cit.*

Figure 3.4 *Newspaper clipping showing the performers of the 1913 production of* A Mask, *pictured on their outdoor stage at the college (SUWC).*

her saviour, 'She was no saint, I tell yer; she was a woman'.[39] Secondly, and perhaps of primary importance, that the future awa ts and armed with this knowledge of past strength women can better enact their own futu es: 'Thus far Woman's written page. / Life alone may write the next: / ...If our play lea e you perplext / see where future womanhood, / here and now, in studious halls, / harks, beyond the ermine hood, / to the greater life that calls'.[40] Designer Louisa Macdonald re alls the original performance with pride:

> It took place on our Colle e lawn on an August evening. We had only one dress rehearsal...we were ll anxious, but when the evening came our Mask was a real dream of beaut . The lights on the lawn illuminating the Sybil's temple and the dark trees b hind, the dancers as they came and went from the dark—the wonderful musi of the words. As one by one the women of the mask advanced into the lig t and faced the audience and the Sybil spoke their fate a picture not to be forg tten was made.[41]

What significance did the perf rmance of this feminist pageant have for its 1913 participants? Ann Larabee notes that th feminist pageant was part of American college life as early as 1895.[42] She argues that as pageants gained popularity, they evolved into a form of theatre whose purpose was to 'absorb disaffected groups into an "American way of life" '.[43] Larabee further claims that Americ n suffragists 'adopted the pageant to widen, rather than to heal the breach'.[44] They achieved this by aesthetic strategies that controlled discourse on female types (characters). When considering the characters that the women of the college chose to dramatise and therefore to enter into discourse with, and realising that the two male verse writers were i structed on which female historical characters to include in *A Mask*,[45] this play can clea ly be read, on the one hand, as feminist theatre that is concerned with widening rather than healing breaches. However, given the conservative confines of Sydney University at the time and the type of patronage that the production attracted, it would be more likely a g ntler form of feminism that was at work on this

---

[39] From the text printed with the 1913 progr m of *A Mask* (SUWC).
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Louisa Macdonald, *The Women's College Within the University of Sydney*, Sydney, 1949, p. 13.
[42] Larabee, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[43] *Ibid*, p. 64.
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] Refer to correspondence (SUWC).

stage—one that would reflect Larabee's positivist reading of similar student pageants in America:

> In student festivals, women wore costumes of fabulous...female figures from legend and myth...and performed their own feats of physical and intellectual strength. These reflexive and symbolic behaviours, which were performed to solidify student community, announced a new shape to the world in which women were self-projecting and self-governing.[46]

Miss Louisa Macdonald was Principal of the Women's College from 1892 to 1919. In late 1892 she was running the Women's Literary Society, whose members met regularly at the College to discuss important topics of the day and to engage in criticism upon literary works.[47] They were also entertained there on several occasions; perhaps the dramatists of the Women's College provided some of that entertainment. The college has a long history with the theatre, not the least of which was demonstrated in their association with Janet Achurch's *A Doll's House* tour. Achurch's last season was distinguished by a matinee benefit performance that raised two hundred pounds for the college.[48] The energies of Louisa Macdonald can be credited with this interesting chapter in Australian women's theatre history. Macdonald's passion for theatre, and for the feminist independence and well being of her students, resulted in those dramatic negotiations experienced by Sydney University women during the suffrage period. She is justly recognised as having 'bestowed...a work of art to be a permanent and treasured possession'.[49]

Melbourne

Janet Clarke Hall was originally established as a college for women students at the University of Melbourne late last century (today the college is co-educational). As a result of its being founded by traditional Anglicans, the feminism of the women students at the time was and continues to be very much hidden from history because of issues of privacy

---

[46] Larabee, *op. cit.* p. 16

[47] *Women's Literary Society Minute Book*, August 1892-August 1893 (Mitchell Library).

[48] Brisbane (ed), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History*, Sydney, 1991, pp. 114-5.

[49] E M T, 'Forward', program of *A Mask*, 7 October 1932, (SUWC).

and respectability. While the history of the college is full of women firsts—for example, the first engineer—there is no clear picture of overt feminist agitation, although the undercurrents can be read. For example, it can not be assumed that just because the women lived in a conservative college that they were not involved in feminist activities elsewhere in the university, or that they adhered to the conservative Anglican values espoused by their college: if they wanted to go to university, this is where they had to live.

During this early period Janet Clarke Hall was closely associated with Trinity College, its 'brother' institution, and between the two colleges there was a constant stream of theatrical fare, including the student's club annual stunt nights.[50] A female student who attended the Janet Clarke Hall between 1909 and 1912 recalls 'reading plays in Dr Leeper's study, and among ourselves in the hostel, and discuss[ing] all manner of things'.[51] *The Melbourne University Magazine* of 1908 ran an article on military conscription where the woman writer made reference to the arguments of British suffragette playwright and novelist Elizabeth Robins, indicating that these women students were up to date on international feminist ideas and culture.[52] 'Varsity Nights' of theatrical entertainment were held once a year, and an old dance card reveals that it was not unusual for a Shaw play to be performed at an 'At Home' gathering along with dancing and other entertainments.[53] The incident which best exemplifies specific feminist control over a theatrical production is the dramatisation of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford*, called *Scenes From Cranford.*

Scenes From Cranford was dramatised by Misses Burke, Tisdall, and Wingrove, all MAs, and was performed in either 1909 or 1910.[54] Always the most popular of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, *Cranford* was widely read, and has been since its first

---

[50] Gardner & Lyndsay, *Janet Clarke Hall*, Melbourne, 1986, p. 81.

[51] Joske Papers (JCH).

[52] Enid Durham, 'More Lamps For the Ladies', *The Melbourne University Magazine*, vol II, no 1, July 1908, pp. 6-7.

[53] Minute Book containing a small dance card which announces the performance of Shaw's *How He Lied To Her Husband*, 20 July 1923, 'The Literary Society Archives' (MU).

[54] 'A Brief Record of Trinity College Hostel 1886-1921'. Under an entry for 1909 the following is recorded: 'The Students performed 'Cranford' in order to raise funds for the tennis court'. However, the first two photos in an album which consists of photos of students from 1897-1914 are from the production of 'Cranford', but this commentator dates it as 1910 (JCH).

SCENES FROM CRANFORD.

Dramatised by Miss Burke, M.A., Miss Tisdall, M.A., and Miss Wingrove, M.A.

In aid of the Trinity College Hostel Tennis Court.

Cast of Characters:

Miss MATILDA JENKYNS (*Daughter of the late Rector*)	Miss E. BAGE
LADY GLENMIRE (*Sister-in-law of Mrs. Jamieson*)	Dr. MURIEL DAVIES
The Hon. Mrs. JAMIESON (*Leader of Cranford Society*)	Miss SKINNER
Miss POLE (*Spinster*)	Miss DIXSON
Mrs. FORRESTER (*Widow of an Army Officer*)	Miss OLIVE DAVIES
Mrs. FITZ-ADAM (*Sister of the Cranford Surgeon*)	Dr. ALICE M. LAVARACK
MARY SMITH (*Miss Matty's young Visitor*)	Miss JOSKE
Miss BETTY BARKER (*a Retired Milliner*)	Miss BAGE
MARTHA (*Miss Matty's Maid*)	Miss KELSEY
PEGGY (*Miss Betty's Maid*)	Miss GILBERT
PETER JENKYNS (*Miss Matty's Brother*)	Mr. PUCKLE
JEM HEARN (*Martha's Lover*)	Mr. GILL
VILLAGE CHILDREN	ISABEL LANGLANDS, ULEX EWART, KONRAD EWART

Stage Manager - - - - MADAME EWART.
Prompter - - - - Mr. NORRIS.
Call Boy - - - - Mr. GILL.

PROLOGUE BY MADAME EWART.

ACT I.

Scene I. Miss Matty's Parlour (Morning). Scene II. The same (Evening).

ACT II.

Scene I. Miss Betty Barker's Parlour. Scene II. Miss Matty's Parlour.
Scene III. The same.

ACT III.

Scene I. Miss Matty's Shop. Scene II. Miss Matty's Parlour.

Music.

I. OVERTURE .. .. *Rosamond.*
MESSRS. GUY AND WILLIAM MILLER.

II. CONCERTO (3 Violins) .. .. *Vivaldi (17th Century).*
MESSRS. DU BOULAY AND MILLER AND MADAME EWART.

III. VIOLIN SOLI—(*a*) Ave Maria .. .. *Schubert Wilhelmj.*
(*b*) Hungarian Dances .. .. *Hauser.*
MADAME EWART.

IV. TRINITY SONG .. .. *Finnis.*
MR. MAIDMENT.

CHORUS—Hurrah! hurrah! for dear old Trinity,
The dearest spot in all the 'Varsity.
Fill up your glass and drink to her success and victory,
And cheer, boys, cheer, for Trinity.

Accompanists - - - Mrs. FRENCH and Rev. H. FINNIS.

The Trinity Women's Literary Society desires to express its indebtedness to Madame Ewart and Mrs. Archer for their invaluable support during the preparation of the Play; also to Mrs. Edward Bage for her kindness in providing the Scenery, and to all who have kindly assisted in other ways.

Figure 3.5 *Program of* Scenes From Cranford, *c1909, (JCH)*

publication lauded by feminist critics for its expression of progressive ideas.[55] The novel stresses the durability of female friendships and the unreliability of sexual love, and champions friendship bonds over kinship ties. In so doing it offers an alternative to the operations of male dominated Victorian culture. It was not uncommon for women's societies to dramatise scenes from *Cranford* for an evening's entertainment. The Women's Freedom League of London, for example, performed three such scenes at an entertainment evening in April 1910.[56] Janet Clarke Hall students chose to perform substantial extracts of the book. The play consisted of three acts of two scenes each, and incorporated three different locations. The evening began with a prologue and after the performance of *Scenes From Cranford*, concluded with some music and singing.

This theatrical event was a typical evening of college entertainment interspersed with a dramatisation of a feminist classic. It was in this manner that the women of Janet Clarke Hall exercised their feminism within an acceptable framework (the formal 'at home' structure of the evening), for a noble cause (to raise funds for a tennis court), and within the safe boundaries of using another's words (Mrs Gaskell's). This allowed women students to voice successfully their own frustrations with Victorian confines whilst at the same time disguising their own politics behind the mask of a respectable author. The evening was a great success; people were entertained, and monies were raised. Beyond this, these university women had successfully negotiated a dramatic expression of their own feminism.

KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

Born at the height of a tropical hurricane in Fiji in 1883, Katharine Susannah Prichard had wanted to attend Melbourne University, but was unable to do so because her mother's ill health caused her to miss a university bursary.[57] Instead, after a stint as a governess she pursued a career in journalism, whilst simultaneously forging a career that has earned her a

---

[55] Recent feminist literary criticism questions this endorsement. See for example Patsy Stoneman's *Elizabeth Gaskell*, London, 1987, pp. 87-99.

[56] Hand painted program dated 23 April 1910, for entertainment held by the Clapham branch of the WFL: Maude Arncliffe-Sennett Papers, vol. 9, p. 91 (BL).

[57] Sandra Burchill, 'Katharine Susannah Prichard: She Did What She Could', in Kay Ferres, (ed), *The Time To Write: Australian Women Writers 1890-1930*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 139.

great respect and some fame as an Australian writer. She is best known as a novelist, but is also known as a dramatist for her 1927 award winning play *Brumby Innes*.[58] Prichard was in fact a prolific writer of plays—and not only in the 1930s and later when most of them were staged.[59] Ric Throssell, Prichard's son, maintains that even though 'she saw drama as a minor part of her lifelong literary output', she admitted that the theatre was her first love, and claimed that she would rather have written for the theatre if only it had offered a livelihood.[60] She participated in some early Australian drama evenings in Melbourne and had some of her work performed by the Actresses' Franchise League whilst working in London from 1912 to 1915. Prichard was an ardent socialist and feminist, and this is reflected in her writing for the stage and everywhere else. The exploration of her early life and work as a dramatist offered here provides an opportunity to fathom how individual Australian women engaged with suffrage theatre. Prichard was not alone in this engagement of course, and is presented here only as one example of this aspect of Australian feminist dramatic tradition.

Whilst Prichard was still alive she received a series of letters from Mr Campbell Howard, who was attempting to compile an archive of Australian plays in manuscript, asking Prichard for her play manuscripts. Prichard modestly responded that she was 'afraid these scripts will not add much to the value of Australian drama, except to show how immature my first efforts were', adding that she was 'inclined to think the fire is a better place for them than the National Library'.[61] Howard countered that 'though they may not be all you would like them to be', her plays would in fact have a distinct significance for Australian drama.[62] Howard was right. Prichard's early, virtually unknown dramatic pieces tell an important story about Australian suffrage drama. Howard astutely convinced Prichard that '[t]he fact that they have been produced must...have had an

---

[58] This play won the 1927 *Triad* playwrighting competition, but was not performed until forty five years later, partially because of its treatment of Aboriginal subject matter and the requirement of a corroboree in the staging.

[59] For an excellent if flawed study of published plays and unpublished plays in manuscript, consult Debra Adelaide, *Bibliography of Australian Women's Literature*, 1795-1990, Melbourne, 1991.

[60] R Throssel, 'Paths Towards Purpose', *Australian Drama 1920-1955*, Armidale, 1986, p. 28.

[61] C Howard, *Correspondence*, letter from Prichard to Campbell, June 1959 (CHC).

[62] *Ibid*, letter from Howard to Prichard, May 1959.

influence on drama', referring to both the development of her own writing techniques and the 'influence on other writers' who may have seen the plays.[63]

England and suffrage activities

In mid 1908 Prichard left for England, planning to earn her living as a journalist. She was armed with a letter of introduction from the Australian Prime Minister of the time, Alfred Deakin, introducing her as 'a young Australian lady of great promise'.[64] Prichard met with some success, but returned to Australia only to return to England again in 1911 for three years. Both of these trips were, as Burchill argues, 'essentially motivated by ambition; the desire to win literary recognition overseas and so acceptance at home'.[65] Prichard herself admitted to the fact that 'I went to London to convince the Australian people that I could write'.[66] On 17 July 1911, Prichard, marching in the Australian contingent, attended a suffrage rally in London. She described the situation in the *Melbourne Herald* as a 'flush of dawn in the sky', and partially attributed its success to an enfranchised Australia which 'which has something to do with the set of the tide here in the favour of womanhood suffrage'.[67] More than writing journalism about the suffrage struggle, Prichard turned her writing skills to the theatre.

The Burglar

Although *The Burglar* was probably written whilst Prichard was in London during her first stay there in 1908,[68] it was not performed in Australia until 1910 at the first Australian Drama Night held in Melbourne and produced by William Moore. When Howard asked Prichard for a copy of this play, she described it as 'hardly worth re-typing'.[69] Yet after the play was produced, the Lothian Publishing Company offered to publish the play: Prichard refused the offer because it did not include the other plays

---

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] Prichard Papers, letter dated 6 May 1908 (ANL).

[65] Burchill, *op cit*, p. 140.

[66] Quoted in Burchill, *ibid.*

[67] Quoted in Burchill, *ibid.*, p. 144, from the *Melbourne Herald*, 25 July 1914.

[68] Prichard Papers, Series 1, Folder 6 *The Burglar* has the London Chelsea address on the frontispiece, and a 1909 date. This also suggest that she was offering it to London producers (ANL).

[69] Letter to Howard from Prichard dated April 1959 (CHC).

produced that night, and she felt it 'unfair' to Louis Esson and Bill Moore that her play was singled out for publication.[70]

When Prichard went to the first rehearsals of *The Burglar*, she found that Bill Moore had—to her horror—changed all the entries and exits, and was having production problems: 'he tore his hair out and said it wouldn't work and he didn't know what he was going to do with this play, it just wouldn't work. So I said, very well, I'll produce it myself, and I did'.[71] Prichard took over rehearsals, organising everything from casting to set production. She felt closely attached to play, originally having intended it to be a lengthier three act piece 'working out the theory of life experience when Sally [a character] says "I want to live in love with the whole world"...it was not finished because there seemed no possibility of the play ever being made use of in Australia—then'.[72]

Prichard was referring to the socialist theme of her play, which points the finger at elitism and wealth, and champions the working class burglar, Bill, who is trying to make a better life for himself. The plot revolves around a burglar who has been funding his education during his holidays by robbing from the rich. He is caught during the act by the 'young lady' of the house, Sally, formerly a governess and now the fiancee of a wealthy man. The two engage in a lengthy conversation, which constitutes the bulk of the play. Sally is torn between the plight of Bill and the responsibility of guarding the gems that have been entrusted to her care by her fiancee. She protects the valuables, but 'guides' Bill into stealing other valuables, thus endorsing both his need and right.

Burchill reads *The Burglar* as evident commitment of Prichard's socialism, but argues that it reveals the immaturity of her politics. She saw Prichard's 'commitment to socialism as a means of fighting injustice and redistributing wealth' as demonstrated in the play, as being 'essentially romantic and sentimental',[73] judging the actions of Sally to be benevolent and charitable in the Victorian philanthropic mode, and therefore condescending. This is a plausible reading given that Prichard does not heavily dramatise

---

[70] *Ibid*, letter from Prichard to Howard, July 1959.
[71] Transcript of a taped interview between Howard and Prichard, 1961 (CHC).
[72] Handwritten note on the manuscript of *The Burglar*, Prichard Papers (ANL).
[73] Burchill, *op. cit.* p. 141

Marxist politics. For example, she does not attack the capitalist institutions that could be held responsible for this divide between rich and poor. I agree with Burchill that in *The Burglar* Prichard does opt for a 'Robin Hood' redistribution of wealth rather than a revolutionary attack on social order: 'I'm a Socialist, you see', says Sally, 'I've always promised myself that if anyone who'd got less than I've got came looking for what I've got, I'd give it to him' [3].[74] Prichard's political inquiry in the play, however, ventures beyond Sherwood forest.

While it is evident in this play that Prichard's socialism was searching for stronger political feet to stand on, Burchill's reading is still too dismissive. It neglects the main sentiment of the play, as expressed by Sally, who wants to 'live in love with the whole world' and be 'happy, happy in common sympathy' [6]. This may seem romantic, but it has its projection in a socialist future where all people are equal, and undivided by barriers such as money. Further, when Sally indicates that she is ashamed of her wealth and encourages Bill to steal her valuables, she demonstrates some depth of political understanding which surpasses shallow Victorian philanthropy: 'One half of the world preys on the other half to hang these ice flames [diamonds] about its necks and arms' [3]. In this sense, *The Burglar*—typical of Prichard's early dramatic writing—provides an example of Australian feminist writers post-suffrage political concerns: that is, what are we going to do about the world, what are our responsibilities to humanity now that we can vote? Prichard has posed that question dramatically in *The Burglar*, framing it neatly within the short one-act format so typical of suffrage dramas.

In an evening's entertainment which attracted an audience of over 500, reviews of the play were mixed.[75] *The Melbourne Herald* said that 'it was obviously a vehicle for conveying socialist principles' through a dialogue between a discontented, wealthy young lady who thinks she is a socialist at heart, and a cynical burglar who is familiar with life's

---

[74] This and all subsequent citations refer to the copy of *The Burglar* housed in the Campbell Howard Collection.

[75] This audience figure is from *The Socialist* (14 October 1910) which said that the 'select audience...followed the performances with keen interest and insight'. Another paper, *The Wonthaggi* (8 October 1910) implied that 'there was a familiarity between performers and patrons'. *The Sporting and Dramatic News* (13 October 1910) said that 'the drama night brings together a collection of artistic Bohemians'.

sordid weariness.[76] *The Sporting and Dramatic News* was also critical, saying the play was 'too wordy', but adding that 'its exponents hardly did it justice'.[77] Frank Hardy, on the other hand, writing in *Labor Calls* called *The Burglar* 'A Playlet with a purpose', and went on to say that:

> If Miss Prichard does not altogether succeed, the fault may perhaps lie with the modern audience, which likes its dialogue cut into snappy snippets, and regards 'purposeful' lines with the dark brown gaze of suspicion and mistrust. 'We came "heah" for entertainment', declares the baleful gaze, 'and—"whai", what are you giving us? Sermons? ...Had Miss Prichard's burglar let loose a few times with his six-shooter, it might have knocked them.[78]

Hardy was also angered by the injustice given to the script by the actors, but it is his comments about an Australian audience's reception to overtly political theatre which are most revealing and reminiscent of Prichard's lament, stated earlier, that such theatre could not 'be made use of' in Australia.

Prichard, by this time a respected journalist and a writer with a reputation, was a natural choice for Esson and Moore to invite to participate in the first Australian Drama Night (they were aware that she was writing plays[79]). Despite the mixed reviews, and recently expressed critical opinions, *The Burglar* does have, as Howard suspected it would, 'a distinct significance for Australian drama'. In those early years of the development of a national drama and a feminist dramatic consciousness, the important thing, as one contemporary critic said, is not 'Whether such plays are good or bad...it is the placing of them before critics [a public] which is the primary object'.[80]

Back to London and the Actresses' Franchise League

Prichard was not in Melbourne for the second Australian Drama Night, because she returned to London in 1912 and remained there until 1915. Throssell implies that she did so because 'free-lance journalism was "impossible" in Australia at that time' and after a

---

[76] *The Melbourne Herald*, 6 October 1910.
[77] *The Sporting and Dramatic News*, 13 October 1910.
[78] Frank Hardy, *Labor Calls*, 13 October 1910.
[79] Transcript of a taped interview between Howard and Prichard, *op. cit.*
[80] *The Sporting and Dramatic News*, 13 October 1910.

'disastrous' visit to the States, she decided on London.[81] Prichard knew from her first visit that it was tough to gain a foothold in the English Press, but nevertheless she arrived 'Ardently Australian and feminist', and ready to make a name for herself.[82] As Throssel in particular has noted:

> London was to be her proving ground. She explored the new ideas of the Freewoman Discussion Circle, the Guild Socialists, Syndicalists and Fabians...she told the conservative ladies of St Ives Primrose League: 'Every day, the women of Australia are making history, proving to the world that women's power in public affairs is for good; that when women vote a great power for the purification and betterment of public life is brought into play'.[83]

Prichard also worked with the WSPU. She eventually withdrew her support, believing that they were only interested in votes for women, and not the wider goal of universal adult suffrage of concern to the already enfranchised Prichard.[84]

London was also Prichard's first serious encounter with grim poverty. This exposure hardened her socialist ideals and resulted in some sharply focussed dramatic writing. For example, *A Miracle in the Street of Refugees*, written in 1910 and set in Soho, deals with this angst in a drama about migrants and slum life. However, it was her writing for the theatre that dealt with the concerns of British feminists at that time which brought her more luck and acclaim as a playwright. Probably through her initial association with the WSPU, Prichard was introduced to the Actresses Franchise League (AFL), and met Inez Bensusan who at this time ran the play department and was responsible for its programming. As a result, at least two of Prichard's plays were performed by the AFL, *Her Place*, in 1913, and *For Instance*, in 1914 (of which no script has survived).

Prichard would have to have had some standing as a noted feminist to have been invited to write for the AFL, or to have had a submitted script selected for production by them. Most likely her credentials were established through both her status as an enfranchised Australian and her writing on suffrage issues in British newspapers. An

---

81 Ric Throssel, *Wild Weeds and Windflowers*, Sydney, 1975, p. 23.
82 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
83 *Ibid.*
84 Prichard was obviously acquainted with the public face of the WSPU, and as a socialist may well have shared Adela Pankhurst's disillusionment with the union.

undated article of Prichard's, for example, had pushed home the lesson of Australian suffrage and demonstrated how the system worked to benefits of all citizens.

> I would like to spread a magic carpet for those who think that the granting of suffrage to women would mean a 'social revolution—battle, murder and sudden death'...I would like the carpet to be caught up in the air and wafted away to Australia. Then would those who stood upon it be convinced they are wrong. ...[Australian] women have voted in federal elections since 1901 and there is no evidence of a social revolution.[85]

This attempt to win over opponents with the hard punch of logic couched in sweet rationale would have been most appealing to the AFL, and in tune with Bensusan's philosophy as 'artistic director'.

Her Place

This play, described and in fact subtitled by Prichard as a 'curtain raiser', is a short one-act piece which can be read as 'an indictment of the English social system which produces "selfish and idle women" of the upper class'.[86] With six characters (four women and two men) and a running time of approximately twenty minutes, it makes an ideal curtain raiser for a larger evening of entertainment, or—more likely—a political meeting.

Mrs Bunning, a devoted and beloved charwoman, has been accused of stealing some expensive jewellery from a house guest. It eventuates that she was covering up for her young mistress, who had borrowed the pearls without permission and subsequently lost them. All is well at the play's end. with the severely humbled accusers and doubters revelling in the dignity and loyalty of this hard working woman who has had a long suffering existence. In apology, the mistress takes Mrs Bunning's hands saying 'The place of selfish and idle women like Rosalie and me, is at the feet of women like you. And your place is on a pedestal, or in a niche in an old cathedral'.[87]

An interesting aspect of this play is Prichard's command of English dialects and how accents are used to depict and satirise class differences. Concerned with the treatment

---

[85] Prichard, 'Australia's Lesson In Women's Suffrage—How the System Works', *The Daily Herald*, nd. Prichard Papers (ANL).

[86] Burchill, *op. cit.* p. 144.

[87] Prichard, *My Place*, from the copy held in the Campbell Howard Collection, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

of servants, *Her Place* is a very Australian, anti-elitist incrimination of class differences. This subject would have had significant impact on the AFL stage, considering their often conservative audiences were generally well used to employing servants. The championing of the working classes continues in Prichard's next play for the AFL, *For Instance.*

For Instance

Although the script of *For Instance* no longer exists, the London Suffrage Journal *Votes For Women* ran a review of the play's July 1914 performance. It was part of a larger story discussing a conference of 'Suffragists From Overseas' which was followed by entertainment:

> In the evening a reception was held...when a delightful entertainment was given under the direction of Miss Inez Bensusan by that indefatigable and generous body of professional women, The Actresses' Franchise League. It included a clever and extremely appropriate little dramatic sketch—*For Instance*—by Katharine Prichard, of which the scene was set in an Australian blouse factory, and it showed not only the better conditions of the working woman in a country where women are voters, but also the greater respect accorded to them by men.[88]

The theme of exploitation of the workers continued to be a recurring motif in Prichard's plays.[89] It is impossible to be certain about what Prichard meant by showing Australian men in a good light, although it was probably an indictment of British men and their sluggish action on political issues of critical concern to women.

This review is revealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, Prichard was obviously held in high enough esteem to participate in such an auspicious occasion and to be held up as a representative of an Australian suffragist. Secondly, the play was set in Australia; this may well have been a first on the British stage (aside from Australian melodramas). It

---

88 *Votes For Women*, 17 July 1914.

89 Prichard's 1935 one-act play *Forward One* also documents the better working conditions of Australian women in a highly unionised country. This dramatic sketch is set in a dress shop rather than a blouse factory, but the sentiments of the play appear to be very similar. Indeed the similarities make me wonder if *Forward One* was perhaps a rewrite a *For Instance*. Gail Reekie, exploring the history of women and consumerism, documents how women's 'non-compliant responses to the masculinism of retailing' constituted feminist self-determination. One of those resistant strategies included 'investigating and publicising the oppressive conditions under which shop assistants worked', and campaigning to improve those conditions: 'The Sexual Politics of Selling and Shopping', in Magarey, Rowley & Sheridan, *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Sydney, 1993, p. 69. In this sense, Prichard's play was a dramatic feminist document of those same sentiments.

would be interesting to know how the Australian accents were handled, and how local references were received—especially as fellow Australian Inez Bensusan actually performed in the play.[90] As the review suggests, Prichard successfully promoted Australia as a country advanced both in the areas of women's enfranchisement and industrial relations.

Afterwards

Prichard returned home to Australia in 1915, her blossoming writing and dramatic career cut short, like so many others, by the war. Modjeska argues that Prichard's decision to leave London was a voluntary one undertaken with a positive zeal: 'She now had the experience she felt she needed, and the confidence...to return as a serious writer'. She also argues that 'While the war was a factor in [Prichard's] return, much more important was [her] nationalism and [her] commitment to Australian literature'.[91] These were certainly reasons why Prichard stayed in Australia after her return, but I question whether or not she would have left London if it had not been for the war, and the concomitant reduction of options for her evolution as a writer. The AFL play department ceased commissioning plays, for example, and the English theatre in general underwent profound change. It is significant that Prichard considered theatre to be an excellent artistic opportunity for conveying political ideals, and regrettable that she had little faith in that opportunity being available in Australia: 'Theatre conditions in Australia are so discouraging for a young playwright'.[92] Regardless, and injudiciously perhaps, home she came—but not without having created an interesting chapter in the history of early Australian feminist theatre.

CONCLUSIONS

These examples of early Australian feminist theatre have ranged from the New Woman, through conservative feminisms, to those who pursued writing careers abroad and were working in the midst of the international women's movement, only ultimately to renounce

---

[90] Review, *Votes For Women*, 17 July 1914, p. 650.
[91] D Modjeska, *Exiles At Home: Australian Women Writers 1920-1945*, Sydney, 1981, p. 6.
[92] Letter from Prichard to Howard, June 1960 (CHC).

their expatriate experience. There are many more playwrights who contribute to this history: Marguerite Dale, Kathleen Watson, Mrs Benbow, and Edith Magary to name but a few.[93] Organisations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union was another organisation which used the theatre for educational purposes, and as a means of feminist fundraising—as did Vida Goldstein in her election campaigns.[94] To further explore these examples would only serve to elaborate on the argument proposed in the 'Introduction', and one that these last two chapters have properly if selectively demonstrated. That is, that early feminist traditions in Australian theatre were characterised by the 'post-suffrage' attitude of its women playwrights; by the expatriate impetus which saw many of those women living and working abroad; and by the influence and adaptation of international trends in feminist theatre. A fuller history of this period remains to be written. Meanwhile, the early feminist theatre practitioners and their professional negotiations discussed in this chapter reveal the vitality and diversity of this period of Australian theatre history. They also indicate that theatre historiography—Australian and feminist—needs to be reconstructed in order to incorporate experiences that successfully challenge the centrality of the American and English stories to women's theatre history and the suffrage experience. Early feminist traditions in Australian theatre were not only defined by women playwrights at home, but those like Prichard who directly (if temporarily) engaged themselves in larger feminist worlds through expatriatism. Stella Miles Franklin's theatrical career, explored in the following chapter, built on that tradition of feminist expatriate desire.

---

[93] For a discussion of Margeurite Dale's play *Secondary Considerations*, see Susan Pfisterer, Promise and Frustration: Australian Women Playwrights 1920-155' unpublished thesis, University of New England, 1991. The work of other suffrage playwrights is further discussed in my unpublished conference papers 'Australian Suffragettes on Stage' (1992, Flinders University of South Australia), and 'Mystery and History and Suffrage Iconography on the Australian Stage' (University of New South Wales, 1994).

[94] See for example J Bomford, *Vida Goldstein: That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, Melbourne, 1993.