MILES FRANKLIN'S EARLY THEATRICAL CAREER

Expatriate Feminist Desire Dramatised

The announcement of the short-list for the 1994 Miles Franklin Award for Australian literature—named after one of Australia's most famous novelists—caused some furore. There were arguments that the judges had been too literal in their interpretation of the clause in Franklin's will, which established the prize and stipulated the qualifications for entry as being 'a published novel or play portraying Australian life in any of its phases'.[1] The judges excluded some entries which were highly considered works on the grounds that the topic of their work was not located in Australia. Critics and authors alike clamoured to know what exactly defined Australian content—was it character, location, or perspective?—and in so doing cast aspersions on the judges' interpretations of the conditions of the award. Further, these decisions engendered a larger debate which begged the question: exactly what are the boundaries of Miles Franklin's intention to reward and encourage Australian writing in the establishment of her prize?

The narrow, literal definitions of 'Australianism' imposed by the judges, and the questioning of those interpretations by critics and writers alike,[2] not only reflect a conundrum specific to a late twentieth century, multi-racial, multicultural Australia, but they are in fact dilemmas that Franklin encountered in her own writing life earlier this century. Franklin spent her most formative years as a writer in 'exile'—as an expatriate. She herself wrote a bulk of work—especially wher her writing for the theatre is taken into account—that today's judges would exclude from eligibility for her own award. So the furore was not just about the $25 000 prize money and the concomitant increase in sales (estimated at around 10 000). The issues at stake were philosophical ones that defined success and

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[1] Condition of Franklin's will quoted by John Stapleton, 'Frank Moorhouse to challenge ban from book prize', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1994, p. 3.

[2] Rosemary Sorenson, 'Short List excludes sensible interpretation', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 94, p. 9A.

acceptance in a precarious industry, and which Miles Franklin herself grappled with throughout her writing life: what does it mean to be an Australian writer, and what value is there in being so defined and recognised? Miles Franklin spent precious time contemplating these questions, but she spent even more time formulating the answers in the guise of solid, hard work. Her writing can speak for itself—well, more or less—depending on the kind of questions one asks of it. The questions that I ask of Miles Franklin's plays are concerned with how Franklin negotiated her place as a woman in the early twentieth century—as a professional, as a socialist, as a feminist, and as an Australian expatriate. Most of all, why did she choose to speak through the medium of theatre? Franklin wrote an enormous of amount of drama, most of it as an expatriate. This comes as a surprise considering that she has neither a reputation as playwright, nor is considered to have written much of significance whilst she was living and working abroad.[3]

This chapter will respond to these questions through an examination of Franklin's life and work in both the United States and England up until 1918, by which time both British and American women had won the vote. Of central concern is Franklin's quest to write theatre. An examination of the historical circumstances of her writing life—including how she earned her money, how she made time to write, what informed her writing—are as pertinent to this story as the products of that quest, the plays themselves. As the Australian historian Manning Clark once said, 'Desire is infinite—capacity is limited'.[4] Franklin no doubt understood this well, as the history of her theatrical career testifies. Without understanding Franklin's struggle to become a playwright, a clear comprehension of her output and her manifest capacity would be impaired, if not impossible.

Many people are unaware that the prestigious Miles Franklin Award for Australian Literature can be bestowed upon a play; its reputation is largely as a coveted prize for novels. It is no coincidence that Franklin included the 'play' option in her will, given her love for the theatre and the fact that she wrote more than twenty full length plays.[5] It is

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[3] Franklin herself gave this impression, which contributed to the myth perpetuated by some historians. See for example Marjorie Barnard who thought that 'perhaps Miles was writing in her scanty leisure time', and who argued that Franklin's plays were written in Australia before she left, doubting sincerely that Franklin could write and crusade at the same time: *Miles Franklin*, St Lucia, 1967, pp. 65-6.

[4] Manning Clark, *A Discovery of Australia*, ABC Boyer Lecture, 1976, ABC spoken word cassette.

[5] Ten or more of these plays fall into the category of suffrage theatre.

ironic that just as the award's reputation rests squarely on outstanding novels, so does Franklin's own. Another irony, perhaps more unjust, is Franklin's reputation as a quintessential Australian writer in the sense that seems to satisfy the judges of the Miles Franklin award. She is best remembered for her Australian pioneering sagas and of course as the author of the early feminist classic *My Brilliant Career*, also set in the bush, the story of an Australian girl struggling to assert her independence and exercise her freedom. Elizabeth Webby has noted that critics often overlook the international context of Franklin's life and work,[6] and it is little wonder considering that it is these 'Australian' books which continue to define her literary reputation. What a shocking delight to discover, then, the depths of Franklin's internationalism and the maturity of her feminist politics, as exhibited in the plays written whilst she was an expatriate.

Franklin had a life-long affair with the stage, an affair which could well be argued was never fully consummated. What if, instead of discouragement and despair, she had met luck and success during the time when she had dedicated her writing life to dramatic production? Australian literary history would certainly have been different, and so would the picture of dramatic traditions in women's early modern writing for theatre. My argument is that the inclusion of the story of Franklin's theatrical endeavours—despite the obvious lack of a solid production history—does in fact radically alter the perceptions of Australia's own literary heritage, and calls for a reconstruction of notions that inform women's theatre history, in particular suffrage theatre history. Franklin made a significant contribution to both of these areas which is generally unknown and—when acknowledged—underestimated. As an expatriate writer and an international feminist, she was in a grand position to have done so.

The structure to test these claims will be a chronological examination of Franklin's personal, political, and professional life. It begins in Australia, travels through the United States of America, and terminates in post-war England with the onset of what is described

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[6] In this review of Roe's *My Congenials: Miles Franklin & Friends in Letters, Volumes I & II* (Sydney, 1993), Webby comments on the photographs chosen to grace the covers: 'The covers of these two volumes feature photographs taken in America in 1906. We see Franklin looking demure with a Japanese parasol and smiling beneath a Mexican hat, as well as unadorned back and front views. They suggest her love of role-playing, but also the international context of her life and work. The latter, often overlooked by Australian critics, becomes very apparent from the letters': 'Miles Franklin revealed in her letters', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 1993, 'Spectrum', p. 11.

as 'post-suffrage' feminism. Some critical examination of selected plays will be undertaken within this context but, given the body of Franklin's work during this period, this chapter can only provide a cursory overview. Is it possible to claim Franklin as one of the greatest early Australian playwrights when I have located no evidence that any of her suffrage plays were ever performed?[7] In keeping with a materialist-feminist reading of Franklin's history, the answer would be yes. Her plays should and can be regarded as unfinished artworks; unfinished in a way that is far more satisfying than discovering an unfinished piece of art from a famous painter, because a piece of drama can be 'completed' through production no matter how long after it was written. In this sense, Franklin's theatre awaits its final claim to fame, but meanwhile should not be disqualified from entering Australian theatre history with the laurels that it deserves.[8] Just as Vida Goldstein confessed when she lost yet another election campaign '...I am quite content to be a pioneer, to blaze the track for other women. That I have made my pathway for them is my rich reward',[9] so too could these sentiments belong to her friend Miles Franklin. Goldstein never made it to the Senate; Franklin probably never made it to the suffrage stage; but their efforts to do so have nevertheless blazed some significant feminist trails. The story of Franklin's 'blaze', a splendid if sacrificial adventure, demonstrates another facet of Australian suffrage theatre history: the female expatriate tradition as a quest enacting feminist desire.

AUSTRALIA: THE EARLY YEARS

Miles Franklin was born in October 1879, the oldest child and the great grand-daughter of Edward Miles, a first fleeter. In 1889 her family moved from rural Talbingo to near Goulburn, a country city centre, and then in 1902 to Penrith, on the outskirts of Sydney. Many critics have documented the influence of Franklin's bush upbringing on her writing

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[7] It would not be surprising if evidence arose in the future; the search is far from over.

[8] This point is lent weight when recalling that Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes*, which won the 1927 *Triad* prize for an Australian three act play was performed for the first time only in 1972, and was not even published until 1940, because of it's unique dramatic treatment and staging requirements (a corroboree). *Brumby Innes* is considered a 'classic' in the Australian drama canon, partly because of its frustrated performance history.

[9] From the *Woman Voter*, May 1910, quoted in Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive woman: Vida Goldstein*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 99.

life,[10] and that is taken for granted in this study. This chapter is interested in the intersections that Franklin's dramatic writing wove in her career as a writer.

Early dramatic writing

There are certain experiences which define Franklin's distinctive qualities as a dramatist. These include: the period of militant feminism in America which resulted in the bulk of Franklin's suffrage plays; the time spent in England and during WWI when she produced most of her social satires; and her commitment—both whilst an expatriate and upon her return to Australia—to the establishment and recognition of a national Australian drama. But her unique life as a playwright began with experimentation in Australia, before her 1905 departure, by which time she was already famous as the author of *My Brilliant Career.*

Vera Coleman believes that 'Too much of the soapbox was to find its way into her creative work, and too much of the artist's complexity and doubt into her career as an activist'.[11] Perhaps this is a fair criticism; it is also pertinent in assessing Franklin's political commitment to theatre. Franklin believed the theatre to be a powerful influence on women's lives, and may have even believed it to be the supreme weapon for feminist activism. In a revealing tribute to the NSW suffragist Rose Scott, written in 1935, Franklin relates an anecdote of Scott's which reveals the exact moment when Scott became a feminist. It was after reading *The Taming of the Shrew* : 'The craven wretch, to give in in that servile manner, and worse still to turn the tables on her own sex! From that moment on I was a rebel against all injustice and wrong', said Scott.[12] This favoured anecdote of Franklin's establishes her regard for the transformational power of the creative arts, and how the recognition of injustice can inspire feminist conversion. Franklin never stopped trying to use the theatre as a soapbox for emancipation.

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[10] A major account of published work on Franklin is contained in the bibliography. Marjorie Barnard, *op. cit.*, and Colin Roderick's *Miles Franklin. Her Brilliant Career*, Adelaide, 1982, provide useful accounts in this area.

[11] V Coleman, *Her Unknown Brilliant Career: Miles Franklin in America*, Sydney, 1981, pp. 53-4.

[12] Miles Franklin, 'Rose Scott: Some Aspects of Her Personality and Work', in F Eldershaw (ed), *The Peaceful Army*, Ringwood, 1988 [1938], p. 95.

Figure 4.1 *Publicity photo of Franklin advertising her as the young author of* My Brilliant Career. *Franklin's trademark signature for some time was 'Merrily Miles', as it appeared in this April 1904 edition of* Life *(ML).*

Even before her politics were so distinctly formed, Franklin had been romanced by the stage. As a girl growing up in the bush, she read more than her fair share of magazines and papers. Her scrapbook reveals that she had long collected clippings about Australian theatre and stars of the stage, especially female singers.[13] Franklin fancied a career as a singer herself at one stage,[14] and this desire is played out in her later writing for the stage where she populates her plays with Australian singing stars, and successful actresses.

[13] See for example 'Eleven Australian Singers' (*The Australasian*, 23 January 1898), which demonstrates Franklin's interest in the achievements of Australian women on stage. This and other similar cuttings are found in her 'Scrapbook, 1891-1901' (FP: ML).

[14] Whilst in America, Franklin continued to train her voice, and even participated in the National Womens' Trade Union League's choir. Coleman says that the 'league women formed a regular chorus "to sing for the eight hour day"—to publicise their campaign for a shorter working day by recitals—and Franklin became an enthusiastic chorister'. Coleman also comments on Franklin's ambitions to be an actress, and notes that despite her professed stage fright, she sang at the NWTUL ball in February 1909 dressed in a Norwegian costume: Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-14.

Other scrapbook clippings show that she followed intellectual debates in the arts; for example, changes in acting styles. Franklin attended live theatre whenever she could. A program for one such outing in Goulburn in 1898 consisted of mostly song, but included a recitation and an original farcical comedy in honour of the 'Grand Football Concert'.[15] As this 1893 clipping of a poem of passion devoted to the stage reveals, she was in love with the romance of the theatre, and how it could woo an audience: 'Oh, my mind still turns to each tragic scene/And the thrilling plot of the play...I wonder if when youth's curtain will fall/And the future lies cold and grey/if life will seem with its gloom and pail/But the aftermath of a play'.[16]

It is little wonder then that along with her other writing, Franklin turned her hand to the dramatic form. Franklin wrote what was perhaps her first play in the 1890s.[17] Her earliest surviving manuscript is entitled *An Infidel and a Religious.* Undated, it is a four-page, handwritten duologue about qualifications for entering the kingdom of heaven. Franklin writes the minister as losing the argument. This demonstrated interest in writing for the stage was developed in Franklin's collaboration with Banjo Paterson.

Paterson was impressed by Franklin as a young author and as a beautiful woman. After Franklin had been a guest of Rose Scott's and 'introduced' to Sydney, he invited her to collaborate with him on a literary venture. As Coleman puts it, he 'had written a racing and sporting yarn but thought it a bit flat'. Paterson wanted Franklin to add 'a little more plot and thrill'. He sent her the manuscript, which vexed Franklin as she had not agreed to collaborate.[18] She in turn wrote and suggested that they instead collaborate on a play. He liked the idea and offered to pay her expenses if she would accompany him on a working tour of Fiji. Even though Franklin had been 'flattered and excited by the interest of this

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[15] The play, *Two Strings To Her Bow*, was performed in November 1898 at the Oldfellow's Hall: 'Scrapbook 1891-1901', *op. cit.*

[16] Quoted from a poem titled 'After the Play' clipped from a July 1893 issue of *The Town & Country Journal, ibid.*

[17] 'Essays and Articles' (FP: ML). The archivist has placed this play first in this collection, suggesting an 1890s time frame. This dating of the play is reinforced by its longhand script, as Franklin's later plays are all typed, a skill she acquired whilst in America.

[18] It could be argued that Franklin had her 'revenge' on Paterson for his presumptuousness in creating the dramatic situation in her novel *On Dearborn Street* where the character Sybil, a stenographer, ghosted for such literary men, who nonetheless took all the credit for her work.

dashing man'—it is rumoured proposed marriage to her—nothing came of the romance, nor their collaboration plans.[19]

At one stage, before Franklin left for America, she worked as a maid in both Sydney and Melbourne. Although she maintained that this was an undercover venture to glean material for her writing, Franklin would in fact have needed the money. Nevertheless, she did draw on this experience for her career as a writer. Whilst masquerading as Mary Ann the maid, she wrote to Scott saying: 'I am enclosing a photo for Mr Wallace. Tell him I would like to know if he thinks I would do to act the part of Mary Ann in this play I'm going to write & I will have to get him to create the star part so the thing is sure of success'.[20] If it was written, no such manuscript of a 'Mary Ann' play has survived. In 1905, however, Sir Francis Suttor was sufficiently distressed at the failed theatrical efforts that he attempted to help Franklin in her ambitions for a stage career by offering to introduce her to theatre managers. Their correspondence ended without results and, once again, Franklin's theatrical venture fizzled.[21] Whether or not she was more frustrated at the thwarting of her writing or of her acting ambitions is not recorded, but it was dramatic writing rather than acting that she continued to pursue.

Who and what influenced Franklin's early writing? This subject has also been well covered by diverse critical commentary. Susan Martin insists, for example, that 'it is surely impossible that Franklin herself was unaware of all the nearly three hundred novels, and uncounted short stories, published by Australian women in the nineteenth century'.[22] Others place Franklin as a square peg in the round hole of 1890s bush nationalism, synonymous with Henry Lawson, and many feminist critics have commented on her place within that masculinist tradition.[23] This brief account of Franklin's dramatic writing in Australia reveals that there have been some oversights in critical accounts of her early career. Further, taken into account, those expressed theatrical ambitions raise some

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[19] Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

[20] Quoted in Roe, vol I, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

[21] See Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

[22] Susan Martin, 'Relative Correspondence: Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and the Influence of Nineteenth Century Australian Women's Writing' in Kay Ferres (ed), *The Time To Write: Australian Women Writers 1890-1930*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 55.

[23] See for example Susan Sheridan, 'Temper Romantic, Bias Offensively Feminine: Australian Women Writers & Literary Nationalism', *Kunapipi*, vol ii, nos 2 & 3, 1985, pp. 49-58.

interesting questions about Franklin as an Australian writer and feminist icon, questions that deserve fuller consideration than can be given here.

Franklin as a young feminist

Franklin's feminism and political philosophies were developed during her childhood and adolescence where she was quick to recognise and articulate injustice of any kind. The publication and success of *My Brilliant Career* brought Franklin to the attention of Australian writers and feminists alike.[24] Franklin's embracement by notable women involved in the suffrage movement such as Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein, and her association with strong women such as her mother, has been discussed elsewhere.[25] This fame was both an advantage and disadvantage for Franklin, as Drusilla Modjeska points out:

> The reception of *My Brilliant Career* was traumatic for her on several counts. On the one hand there was notoriety and disgrace at home; on the other hand she was taken up and lionised in Sydney, which, for a young girl from the bush, was, in its own way, just as hard to handle. Further, the novel was fundamentally misunderstood and serious conflicts arising out of it, conflicts which were to affect her entire life, were not recognised. [26]

Regardless of the hardships that followed her fame, Franklin's introduction to Australia's most powerful feminists was of great influence and benefit to her. At the time, and in years to come when she was further isolated from her family by her ambitions and difference, the friendship and professional support of such women became her greatest comfort, as many personal letters from her extensive correspondence testify.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Franklin's contact with leading feminists was her embracement of the international character of Australian feminism. Franklin was excited about the possibilities and opportunities of a worldwide women's movement.

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[24] As Jill Roe says, 'there is by now an almost mythic quality to the story of the bush girl who suddenly produced a wondrous rebellious novel in the 1890s': 'Miles Franklin's Library', *Australian Cultural History*, no 11, 1992, p. 58.

[25] See for example Judith Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Australian Feminism*, Melbourne, 1994, and Bomford, *op. cit.* Roe insists that due credit for Franklin's emerging feminism must go to Franklin's mother Susannah, as the first of many strong women in her life: *My Congenials*, *op. cit.* vol II, p. xx.

[26] Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, Sydney, 1981, p. 34.

Circumstances soon transpired to result in Franklin wanting to engage in those international developments herself. Gardner comments on the developing dilemma which contributed to Franklin's increasing expatriate desires:

> Miles Franklin's "bush nationalism", in which she could only ever occupy a marginal position, enabled her confidently to address her fellow Australians from a woman-centred feminist position...Ironically, though, this new cultural climate had not transformed the institutions of literature and journalism far enough to allow a young woman writer like Franklin to earn her own living in Australia. [27]

Franklin was ready to move on. Following the advice of Vida Goldstein, and with the blessing of her mother but against the wishes of Rose Scott, Franklin readied to spread her own feminist wings in America.

Jill Roe offers a plethora of reasons why Franklin left Australia: she wasn't ready to marry and was being pressured to do so; the United States was considered by many to be a more progressive society; Franklin hoped that publishers might be more sympathetic there; and Goldstein had provided her with promising introductions. Franklin sailed unchaperoned on the *SS Ventura* for San Francisco on 7 April 1906. After arriving in San Francisco and staying with the Whelan sisters in Oakland, she headed for Chicago, 'the world's most shocking city', in late 1906.[28]

VENTURING FORTH TO AMERICA

Franklin arrived in Chicago a woman with a reputation, and was warmly welcomed and lionised. She later said:

> ...when I went to America, Australia was so conspicuous for her achievements in political measures for social betterment, for which the world elsewhere was only beginning to agitate, that it was a burden to me. I was too nervous to speak in public and I was tortured for requests to speak on the wonders of Australia, we had not only woman suffrage but the 8 hour day, state care of orphaned children and many other ameliorative provisions.[29]

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[27] Susan Gardner, 'My Brilliant Career: Portrait of the Artist as a Wild Colonial Girl' in Carole Ferrier (ed), *Gender, Politics & Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels* (second edition), St Lucia, 1992, p. 45.

[28] Roe, vol I, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[29] Talk given the 'Official ALP Womens' Central Organising Committee' in August of an undated year at Mark Foys, Sydney, 'Talks c 1937-1951', p. 29 (FP: ML).

Although tested by these demands, Franklin in general welcomed the reception. It gave her both an income and the confidence to get on with her real work—writing. As Susan Magarey notes, Franklin was not the first Australian feminist to land in Chicago. Catherine Spence had visited the city during 1893 and became acquainted with Jane Addams and Hull House. It was this through this feminist network that Alice Henry also found herself in Chicago, and later became a great influence in Franklin's life.[30]

Chicago

1911 saw the beginning of Chicago's 'Little Renaissance', a movement fostered by regional writers congregated in Chicago (among them, Theodore Dreiser). In 1912 there was also a theatrical upsurge in Chicago centred around the Little Theatres.[31] While Franklin was influenced by these movements, she was also undergoing personal consolidations of her own politics—not only because of her job with the National Women's Trade Union League, but through her long hours spent reading in the library when she became acquainted with George Bernard Shaw's work. She was also an enthusiastic theatregoer whilst living in America. In combination, these forces inspired a period of literary productivity that she never repeated, and most of that output consisted of writing for the theatre.

Chicago had experienced rapid capitalistic growth during the last decades of the nineteenth century—the age of the robber barons. Franklin cast aspersions on the negative side of such growth in some of her American plays, but initially she marvelled at the benefits of the Progressive movement, which as Roe points out had found a good home in Chicago with institutions such as Jane Addams Hull House established in 1889: 'Although the progressive era was short lived...it was one of the most vibrant and creative periods of American history', and Franklin experienced this optimism during her Chicago years.[32] Coleman also comments on the Chicago that Franklin entered: 'she had come to join a complex, multiracial, multilingual society with a proud tradition of fought for

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[30] S Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography a Catherine Helen Spence*, Sydney, 1985, p. 165.
[31] Roderick, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
[32] Roe, vol I, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

independence and republicanism...to the struggle for one migrant among hundred of thousands'.[33] In early twentieth century Chicago, there was a community of single women of all ages which formed around the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL) a 'gynaecentric environment in which women were [each other's] closest companions,...working colleagues, and...sources of emotional support'.[34] Because of these close relationships and the enormous variation in professional and social life on offer, as Modjeska notes, 'It must have been gratifying for Miles Franklin to live and work in such an environment after her lonely years in Australia struggling to live alone with little support or understanding for the hard decisions that were involved'.[35]

Despite these insights, not enough is understood about Franklin's time in Chicago. Accounts of the influence of the Little Renaissance on Franklin's development as a writer have been inconsequential, for example, and even less has been said of her involvement with the the Chicago theatre scene. Considering the amount of drama that Franklin wrote in Chicago, as well as her novels, this 'hole' offers an especially fruitful area for further research. The delights and despairs experienced by Franklin in Chicago combined to develop defining characteristics of her writing, particularly for the stage. This influence has until now been sorely neglected.

Working life

Franklin had a lengthy professional association with Chicago branch of the NWTUL. This began in 1908 when she commenced as a part-time secretary, a position which became full-time in 1910. From 1913 she was assistant editor of the league's national journal *Life and Labor* and, before leaving for England and after Alice Henry's departure, briefly editor in 1915. During all this hard work, and despite financial strains and health set-backs, Franklin managed to maintain her creative work. As Roe says, and Franklin's own diaries confirm, 'In strenuous but exhilarating circumstances, she wrote furiously'.[36]

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[33] Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

[34] Nancy Schrom Dye, 'Creating a feminists Alliance: Sisterhood and Class conflict in the New York Women's Trade Union League', quoted in Modjeska, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

[35] Modjeska, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

[36] Roe, vol I, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

For the purpose of this study, what is most interesting about Franklin's professional association with the NWTUL is her work as a journalist for *Life and Labor*,[37] and the theatrical activities of the league.


THE CHICAGO DAILY TRIBUNE: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1910.

Mrs. Raymond Robins and "Cabinet" in Strike Conference: Armed Patrolmen on Guard in Vicinity of a "Storm Center."

Figure 4.2 *This 1910 newspaper clipping shows Franklin (second from right) involved in strike meetings as part of her work for the NWTUL. She was proud of her political work, and kept extensive clipping files of her activities for publicity purposes (FP: ML).*

Life and Labor advertised itself as being 'especially qualified to give prominence to stories about working girls and by working girls.'[38] Franklin's role as a journalist and assistant editor was stated as being to 'review books…from the sociological point of view, and…to adjure all in the struggle for industrial justice to keep up their spirits, to preserve

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[37] For a detailed account of Franklin and Henry's editorship of *Life and Labor*, see Diane Kirby, *Alice Henry: The Power of Pen and Voice, The Life of an Australian-American Labour Reformer*, Cambridge, 1991, chapter 4.

[38] *Life & Labor*, December 1912, p. 356.

and enlarge their sense of humour and to beware of making contributions too long or dismal'.[39] Aside from reporting on national affairs, there was also international coverage of the suffrage movement, commenting occasionally on Australian and New Zealand progress in a post-suffrage environment. Franklin's journalism betrays her preferences for these issues, but she was also passionate about industrial injustice that women suffered in the workplace.

Mrs Pankhurst's visit to the United States was covered by Franklin. This is an interesting article in that it discusses international differences in the women's movement, but primarily because, by casting her vote with the British militants, it reveals Franklin as a suffragette rather than a suffragist.[40] Another article underlines the socialist roots of Franklin's particular brand of feminism, one which despises the exploitation of workers. In this piece she berates those who purchase brooms from manufacturers who underpay women migrant workers: 'No housewife worth her salt or with any intelligent understanding of her moral relationship to industrial life...would want to soil her home with a broom...which had been made by taking advantage of her unprotected sisters'.[41] These concerns, expressed through her journalism, were also thematic issues in later plays.

Modjeska has considered the feminism of *Life and Labor*, arguing that 'the journal's politics took shape in the particular context of the American labour movement'. This, she continues, not only influenced Franklin, but 'many of the feminist ideas and concepts were echoed in Australian feminism and by Australian women writers'.[42] While Modjeska considers these links from the angle of the American influence on Australian feminism and writing, I suggest that at the very least the influence was a two-way street. Considering Henry and Franklin's editorship, and the esteemed status of Australian women as enfranchised citizens, it could even be argued that the influence flowed more strongly in the other direction. Regardless, Franklin's time spent working for the

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[39] *Ibid.*

[40] See Franklin's article 'Mrs Pankhurst in the United States', *Life and Labor*, December 1913, pp. 364-6, where she reveals her political sympathies.

[41] Miles Franklin, 'The New Broom and How to Handle It', *ibid*, October 1914, pp. 294-296.

[42] Modjeska, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

NWTUL—in particular her work with *Life & Labor*—undoubtably energised her feminism and inspired her dramatic writing.

Theatrical activities

The NWTUL used the theatre for fun, fundraising, and educational purposes. In the May 1911 monthly report of the league's national activities it was noted that the Chicago branch enjoyed 'an entertainment...a dramatic club gave the programme, which consisted of a recitation in English and Jewish, and there was vocal and instrumental music and a short speech'.[43] The Cort Theatre held a benefit beginning in February 1912 to raise funds for the new NWTUL headquarters, a fire having destroyed their old premises: 'Margaret Illington, in the great labor play *Kindling*...is expected to bring us great returns'. The theatre also functioned as a social centre for the league while it was without a home. Theatrical activities provided a regular and profitable source of income for the NWTUL. Miss Elisabeth Fabian was responsible for organising the 1915 Annual Benefit which raised over $700 (that year's performance was Frank Craven's farcical comedy *Too Many Cooks*).[44] The Hull House Dramatic Club staged similar theatrical events: 'The Hull House Dramatic Club...have...done fine work in bringing out new and good plays that most managers fought shy of as not being sufficiently money-making'.[45] These activities suggest that Franklin was in good company and had ample opportunity to develop her theatrical skills.

An avid theatregoer in Chicago, Franklin's diaries reveal that it was by far her favourite pastime. Her tastes ranged from opera to popular commercial successes, but she preferred the cutting edge of performances in the Little Theatre scene. It was not unusual for her to see two or three plays a day when time and finances permitted. Important for this consideration of Franklin as a suffrage playwright is the question: to what extent was Franklin exposed to feminist and suffrage plays of the period?

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[43] *Life and Labour*, May 1911.

[44] This and following information is all gleaned from various issues of *Life and Labor*.

[45] Miss Laura Dainty Pelham ran this club. If she or her estate has any personal papers, they be may revealing about Franklins' attempts (or successes) in this theatrical environment. Tracing such possible sources is the kind of further research which needs to be undertaken in America to provide a fuller understanding of Franklin as a playwright.

As a theatre centre, Chicago was and is second only to New York in the United States. While Franklin was living in Chicago, she would have had the opportunity to see any plays of national importance, and certainly her diaries reveal that she also saw many notable tours of successful English plays; for example, *Votes For Women!* was performed in Chicago in 1908. Playwright Elizabeth Robins was the sister-in-law of Margaret Drier Robins, Franklin's boss at the NWTUL. Margaret wrote to Elizabeth telling her that her play received a reading and was attended by about 350 men and women. It was organised by Mrs Wentworth of the Chicago Political Equality League.[46] Franklin no doubt attended this performance and probably met Elizabeth, a contact whom she was later to use in London. Franklin's diary reveals that she also attended a performance of Shaw's popular suffrage play *Press Cuttings*, in November 1913.

Franklin's love of the theatre scene in Chicago and its influence on her development as a playwright, is best summed up by Franklin herself in a speech she delivered in Sydney many years later:

> When I was a girl in Chicago, small groups of young people interested in new experiments in the theatre. .used to be able to meet. I remember especially the studio of a young sculptor, now famous, where we could go and take our friends and pay ten cents each for the rent of the studio, or for coffee and biscuits...Some controversial soul would start an argument and anyone could contribute to it...Ideas flew fast and furiously. It was splendid mental sport.[47]

Such reflections, coupled with the theatrical activities mentioned above, suggest that Franklin was as equally absorbed in her writing for and love of the theatre, as she was in her feminist reform work with the NWTUL. It is little wonder that she wrote some of her best plays during this period.

Leaving America

Despite the pace of her league work, Franklin not only had time for her writing and theatre activities, but she pursued many other personal interests as well. In the summer of 1909

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[46] This letter, dated 24 February 1908, is contained in the Elizabeth Robins Papers, Fales Library, New York University. I am grateful to Angela John, who is writing a book on Elizabeth Robins, for sharing this information with me.

[47] 'Notes For Talk to the Junior Literary Society, Sydney', undated: 'Talks 1937-51', p.187 (FP: ML)

she attended school in Madison, Wisconson, and studied French. She had influential friends, including the mathematician Arnold Dresden, and spend much time cultivating friendships of all kinds. In 1911 Franklin holidayed in London and Paris with her dear friend Editha Phelps. In March 1914 she began public speaking classes, singing lessons, and driving lessons. Franklin also had romances, some of these serious, with with a handful of men most notably with Guido Mariotti and Fred Pischel.

Things were not always rosy. Franklin's personal papers reveal that she more often than not suffered from severe financial pressures, and experienced ill and often debilitating health on a fairly regular basis. Her diaries are full of accounts of how 'depressed', 'miserable', 'unhappy' and 'weary' she often was. Despite this suffering she worked extraordinarily hard on her writing. For a woman so apparently capable and determined, Franklin suffered severely from self-doubt and criticism. America had not been as full of sympathetic publishers as she had imagined (in Australia), and her writing career—although prolific—did not go according to her own plans. Her last diary entry for 1913 reads:

> Looking back over the year: I can not recall one thing of usefulness or worth that I have accomplished for others, nor one of pleasure or satisfaction for myself. The futility of my existence, my weakness in effort, my failure in accomplishment fills me with a creeping melancholy that grows more impenetrable. I will fight against it once more by hard work and if in two years the results are no better than in the past I shall die of my own volition.[48]

This is the longest and most personal entry in her diary of all the years since 1909. Her assessment of her own life is wrenching, and perhaps had more to do with physical illness and lack of financial success with her writing, than with a sense of real progress in her development as a writer.

Franklin closed a large chapter in her life when she sailed from New York to London on 30 October 1915. Roe presents Franklin's decision to leave America as a combination of financial troubles with the league, and pressures of the first world war 'which among other things effectively re-cast her as an alien'. She goes on to say that Franklin 'came to feel her position was untenable', but admits that 'No doubt there were

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[48] See Franklin's diaries from 1909-1915 (FP: ML).

other, private considerations', suggesti ıg failures in romance as a contributing factor.[49] Perhaps, given her ambitions as a ɔlaywright, a significant 'other' consideration in Franklin's departure for England was l:er failure to make an impression on the American stage. After almost a decade of arder t battlir.g to make her presence felt in America, Franklin had made an exceptional con:ribution to the women's movement—one that had significantly enriched her, and Americ:n feminism. As she sailed for England, Franklin's dreams of becoming a successful playv'right had become temporarily exhausted.

THE AMERICAN PLAYS

'I have always held out [that] drama sho uld carry an ethical message as well as entertain. It should be one of the greatest modern influences for good.' So said Avis, a famous actress and a character in Franklin's play *The Survivors*, written in 1908. Avis was lamenting the sad state of American drama of the day, which she thought was full of 'pornographic balderdash for the edification of mon eyed degenerates' [27].[50] Franklin's fictional Avis neatly expresses the sentiments of feminist suffragette theatre practitioners who used the stage for the 'good influence' they hoped to achieve with their political and social ambitions. The plays written until Frar klin's departure from America are entirely devoted to presenting the stories and tasks of women's emancipation in an entertaining, wistfully instructive manner. Women's lack of the vote was a cornerstone of offence in all of these explorations and coupled with wider feminist critiques, subsequently defines Franklin's plays of this period as suffrage dramas.

The Survivors

One of Franklin's most entertaining suffragette characters is found in Geraldine Garity in *Survivors*, written in 1908 (this is the same year that saw the formation of the Women Writers Suffrage League and the Actresses' Franchise League in England). *Survivors* is very similar in content to English suffrage drama, and even uses the technique of a

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[49] Roe, vol I, *op. cit.* p. 59.

[50] This and all subsequent page references are taken from Franklin's plays in manuscript (FP: ML).

suffragette activist speaking to a large on-stage crowd at a rally that English suffrage playwright Elizabeth Robins uses in *Votes For Women!* which was first performed in London in 1907. However at four-acts *Survivors* is a longer play than is characteristically regarded as suffrage drama.

Survivors is the story of a rich heiress and talented actress who befriends the poor people who live and work in the streets surrounding her theatre. This, coupled with distaste at how her industrialist father had made his money, leads to her radical conversion to socialism. Various foundations fight with each other hoping to win the money she has sworn to give away to the most worthy cause. Thanks to the arguments of Geraldine Garity, the suffrage cause win. Here is part of her winning speech:

> GERALDINE: ...I consider it the most immediate step to be taken in human progress because people must be put into a position to help themselves...if I saw a person here all tied up [and] helpless, I would not rush to invent a nice chair to fit his crippledness, I would seek to remove the cords so that he would be free and wholesome...all that philanthropy attempts is to make chairs for cripples, it don't meddle with the cancerous systems that produce cripples...[women] are ranked on the plane of slaves and inferiors...We have been trying to live upon the 'chivalry' of men...The most stupid of us can not realise what a failure this scheme of existence has been...In this era when we fight with ballots instead of bullets, to leave women unenfranchised is forcing half the human race unarmed into the armed industrial field...Get women the vote and if you have any money left teach them—and men—how to use it so that by organisation they can win a limited workday, a living wage and all that goes with it...the joy of a beautiful life [44].

The reference to cripples is highlighted by Franklin by one of the male characters being confined to a wheelchair. During the play his humiliation at condescension and his reliance on others is used as a dramatic symbol of the oppression of unenfranchised women.

An Australian perspective of the enfranchised woman is apparent in Franklin's professed understanding through the character of Geraldine that the vote is not enough: 'how to use it' properly is essential for feminist gain. Set in 1908 Chicago, and written under the pseudonym 'Tomphool', *The Survivors* has a large cast of over thirty (including extras). Most of the principal roles belong to female characters. Aside from the major

theme of socialism working for female emancipation, minor themes also include the state of contemporary American theatre, and the nature of love.

Franklin apologises in advance for the trite ending, which sees the beautiful Avis falling in love with her consumptive playwright (male) friend. She calls the play 'A picture of contemporary existence pulled into theatrical shape and necessarily conventional conclusions by one having the right or wrong—possibly the wrong—psychological insight, and more or less—probably less—sociological experience and experiment'. This 'apology' and the 'acceptable' ending indicates that Franklin was aiming for the commercial stage, whilst at the same time criticising it. This tongue in cheek attitude, along with the socialist politics in the play, won her no favours with theatre managements.

The Survivors seems to be a highly actable play, but it could benefit from tough dramaturgy. Two versions of the play exist, both in four-acts, but one is substantially shorter; it is this version that has a better pace and intensity. Many of the extras seem superfluous in one sense, in another sense they add an epic atmosphere to the drama. It is easy to imagine *The Survivors* being adapted as a historical musical. In summary, the sophisticated plot and the fine characterisations in this play make it an exceptional example of suffrage theatre, one that would fare well with a modern interpretation.

The Waiter Speaks

The Waiter Speaks was probably written in 1913 and, as a short one act sketch, is more typical of suffrage drama. Franklin set the play in the Chicago winter during 'one of the great social uprisings among the garment workers so prevalent of late years', in a comfortable restaurant with a clientele of 'successful, pushing business men to whom a waiter is merely a part of the machinery' [1]. This is a particularly interesting play for many reasons. There are five characters, three male waiters and two female guests. Mrs Oliver Dobson, a union representative, is described as 'a woman of vivid colouring and interesting vivacity of manner', and her unnamed secretary as 'a pale and tired looking young woman' [1]. These descriptions fit Franklin's impression of herself, and of her

NWTUL boss Mrs Robinson, in an uncanny manner. The play's action reads like an animated diary entry and could well have been taken from actual events.

Mrs Dobson and her secretary are having a late lunch. While a waiter discusses the character of his profession with them the subject of unionism is raised. Another waiter reveals that certain businessmen lunching in the restaurant have been speaking ill of Mrs Dobson, who is activating on behalf of the garment workers who are presently on strike. The waiters who are themselves exploited, working twelve hour days, have raised some money to donate to the strike fund and are seeking Mrs Dobson's advice. The head waiter, however, did not contribute as he does not believe in unions. He contends that unions 'would spoil a man's standing' as all members pay the same dues 'whether they know how to wait...or not' [3]. This egalitarianism is seen as insulting by this waiter, an attitude which Franklin ridicules. The play concludes with Mrs Dobson promising to speak at a union meeting for them, and hoping that all workers will soon be organised and better off.

Clearly, the subject of this short drama is of direct professional concern to Franklin and the NWTUL: unions; the exploitation of labour; the garment workers strike; foreign workers; and women activists. Anti-capitalist sentiments are expressed against the rich fat men who eat in the restaurant. Direct reference is made to a strike that was actually taking place in Chicago at this time:

> WAITER 1: ...is there any hopes of them winning the strike?
>
> Mrs DOBSON: I hope so. It is a great fight. If we could only get public opinion aroused I am sure it would not stand for the conditions of work and pay that those young girls are suffering [3].

Through this character, Franklin vocalises the feminist sentiments of the NWTUL and reveals her own indignation. In this next extract, a waiter is having his say to Mrs Dobson about the men he has to serve all day:

> WAITER 1: They come in here and talk about the garment workers. They don't know how to be a gentleman. They say 'these ignorant foreigners, what do they want with higher wages? They work for 10 cents a day in their own country and then they comes over here and wants the wages of skilled peoples'. Ignorant foreigners, that's what they say. If a person is an ignorant foreigner, he needn't always remain an ignorant foreigner—I tell you Mrs Dobson, they ain't half so ignorant as them that comes here to talk of them [4].

The title of the play comes from the waiters speaking out about such injustices and revealing the truth about exploitation. Mrs Dobson endorses this, saying 'We can not always keep silence...there comes a time when we must speak out, for the good of our soul and the welfare of our brothers' [5].

Franklin includes in the play a disguised reference to a real life figure, Elizabeth Maloney, who had been an officer in the Chicago Waitresses Union since since 1903. This tactic of including a well-known feminist activist as an offstage character in a suffrage drama was ambitious and highly unusual. It makes the action of the drama less fictional and more pertinent to the intended audiences. Perhaps it was meant to be staged at strike meetings, as a propaganda piece to convert anti-union sentiments, and to bolster demoralised strikers. As Franklin said of Maloney, 'Those unpublic-spirited people who are terrified by any suggestion of social progress would surely be galvanized into an attack of acute dyspepsia if they could divine what Elizabeth Maloney is planning for the good of the workers as she swiftly places an order'.[51] At this time Maloney was also a member of the executive board of the NWTUL, chairman of the league's legislative committee, and along with Agnes Nestor, organiser the league's successful campaign in Illinois which secured the ten-hour day for working women.

The Waiter Speaks is almost a political speech written for Maloney. The play's logic leaves little room for doubting the righteousness of the waiting profession's grievances, nor of the need for union legislation. Short, sharp and political, it is an excellent example of suffrage propaganda drama. As a piece of theatre, it could have benefited from the inclusion of some lighter moments. As Franklin herself says, the waiting profession 'might very well be compared with a long stiff part in a comedy repeated five or six times during the day',[52] and a touch of this 'comic stiffness' would have suited the play well. Regardless, *The Waiter Speaks* is a sharp satire with ample room for fun by virtue of Franklin's witty characterisations in performance. The writing is lean, expressing great hunger for feminist and social equity.

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[51] Miles Franklin, 'Elizabeth Maloney and the High Calling of the Waitress', *Life and Labor*, February 1913, pp. 36-40.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Aunt Sophie Smashes a Triangle

Aunt Sophie Smashes a Triangle, written in 1913, is set in Chicago and explores the changing role of women through the discussion of such issues as motherhood, financial independence, spinsterhood, marriage, women's mental health, and suffragette politics. The plot is full of melodramatic twists and contrivances. The husband (David) is unfaithful to his wife (Alice) with a young woman of traditional female values. David's suffragette sister (Sophie) and his own 'converted' (to feminism) son warn Alice of the affair. She books into a sanatorium to recover her health; coincidentally, so has David's mistress. Unknowing of each other's identity they become friendly and swap ideas about love and womanhood. Responding to his mistress' telegram, David arrives only to be met by a surprised and flattered Alice who believes he has hired a private detective to find her. Eventually the penny drops and the two women work through the problem with the help of Sophie. David's mistress abandons him and becomes a suffragette; as does Alice, to whom he happily returns a different man.

Much of the dialogue is actually conducted between Sophie and her brother David. Dramaturgically, all men who do not sympathise with women's rights lose not only the argument in hand but also, gradually, physical space on the stage. Conversely, those male characters who are suffragette sympathisers, David's son for example, enjoy a different dramatic space. Whilst it is not unusual that the husband be represented as uncomfortable in his own home because that is regarded as the woman's sphere, it is dramaturgically unorthodox that his 'male' space within the home, the office, be invaded—as it is in *Aunt Sophie*—by one righteous female after the other. This eventually leads David to retreat and abandon not only his own ideological space but his real physical world, or its representation on the stage.

This is a clear example of feminist dramaturgy at work. Tracy Davis points out that feminist theatre historians have shown that the placement of characters on stage has specific meaning: 'Western Culture reads the centre as power. It reads the periphery as silence. It reads confinement as imprisonment for men and proper socialisation for

women'. Therefore, if a female character is centre stage she is defying conventions. Davis also cites Jenkin's work which points out that: '...males claim and name spaces in the domestic sphere. They have honoured places in the living room and dining room...they even have their own studies'.[53] Considering this, Franklin's manipulation of her characters and their subsequent subversion of 'stage' space mirrors, and/or inspires, a subversion of 'real' space.

Significantly, not all of the plays conflict is male/female. David and his suffragette son clash forcibly, as do Sophie and Alice. Here is pre-conversion Alice, sick of Sophie's feminist advice:

> ALICE: Oh it's easy for you to talk and have such cool sense. You've never been married. You know nothing about marriage and what the tie means.
> SOPHIE: [resignedly] A spinster has to endure that venerable wheeze at least once every day. There is not enough sense or truth in it to break an eggshell.
> ALICE: [wailing afresh] You've never been married—you don't...
> SOPHIE: Now Alice, don't you ever say that again. I've been made a big a fool of as if I had, if that will serve to raise me to your level [12-13].

It is significant that Franklin labelled *Aunt Sophie* 'A Comedy of Domesticity'. As this extract exemplifies, the subject of exploration is to do with countering claims of womanhood. The changing role of women; female independence, both emotional and financial; spinsterhood; marriage; women's mental health; and the suffragette cause are all explored in an attempt to promote a feminist vision of womanhood.

Another highly actable play, *Aunt Sophie* contains Franklin's most sophisticated commentary on womens' emancipation, presented through multi-dimensional, complex characters and delivered with wit and authority. She does not shirk from confronting important feminist issues. Here Sophie explains to Alice how and why she converted to feminism:

> SOPHIE: ...when I had regained my sense and health it was too late. I was past the age of attracting another lover.
> ALICE: ...I suppose that's why you took to suffrage?
> SOPHIE: I took to suffrage because in the light of common sense it seemed the nearest thing to get out of the way, not to replace love by it as some

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[53] Tracy C Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History', in Postlewait & McConachie (eds), *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, Iowa City, 1989, p. 75.

> nincompoops imagine. I want the women of the future to have a wider outlook, to have more interests so that when love goes astray they will have some healthy outlet and not have to sit down and let neurasthenia devour them...I'm a silly, sentimental sort of a person, that's why I have taken to civic work. I want things to turn out right and people to live happy ever after, and as that is not possible under present circumstances, some of us are determined to make different circumstances, different human nature [43].

Sophie and her brother David continue this theme, arguing throughout the play about love and marriage, and women's choices. These important issues dominate the play, which remains essentially a comedy of errors Franklin is most convincing in her arguments, but allows ample room for characters who have different opinions. This balanced approach to subject matter is a sign of an experienced dramatist. Franklin was soon to test this experience in a different market.

ENGLAND: CHANGING TUNES

Franklin's interest in the theatre did not wane whilst she was in London, she merely took another tact. There were plenty of pleasures for her—meeting George Bernard Shaw was a highlight—but it was during this period that Franklin was desperately, and without success, trying to establish herself as a serious playwright. Franklin sums it up well enough herself, in this letter relating her meeting of Shaw compared to the success of her other theatrical enterprises. She describes meeting him as:

> ... a night of pure delight, an event to be marked with a red asterisk in the dreary diary of one who has weathered upwards of four years of what the twin blights of patrioteering and profiteering have accomplished towards the stultification of dramatic art in London...[54]

Franklin's idea of what theatre should be never seemed to match those of the actors, producers, or theatre managements she approached. Although she made some compromises in an attempt to write commercially appealing material, Franklin's dramatic writing did not meet London standards What are clearly strengths in her work—feminist treatment of subject matter and stage space; the inclusion of 'foreign' characters, themes,

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[54] Miles Franklin, 'Essays on Irish Theatre': Essays & Articles', p. 95 (FP: ML).

and dialects; and her growing preoccupation with things Australian—were seen to be problems rather than unique assets.[55]

As an Australian in London, life was complicated for Franklin. Her experiences were not typically those of other Australian expatriates. After such a long period in America, Franklin said that 'People would not accept me as Australian because I had not the distinctive accent'.[56] Used to multicultural Chicago and hardened in her socialist thinking, Franklin was offended by London's class distinctions as she experienced them. As Roe points out, however, Franklin's entry into London life was made easier by her connections with the feminist network just as it had been when she arrived in America.[57] Roe also notes that despite her protestations that she was through with social work, Franklin worked for a nursery school which was a pioneer in its field, and after her war service with the Scottish Women's Hospitals, for the National Housing and Town Planning Council: 'Although she was working in a lowly capacity as secretary, she had nonetheless chosen a progressive, if respectable, independent pressure group working for public housing'.[58]

It was not until the 1930s that Franklin returned to settle permanently in Australia. This section concentrates on Franklin's life and work in London up until 1920, two years after English women had won limited franchise. This time span, though relatively short, saw England and Franklin experiencing profound change. Arriving in London during the war and before women had the vote, Franklin lived and worked through the conclusions of both these traumatic historical events. In a post-war London, and particularly a theatre profession, that wanted to forget the horrors of war and 'party', Franklin was caught in the middle of pursuing her honest theatrical ambitions and earning a living.

Having contracted malaria whilst serving in Serbia, Franklin was not always up to either task. Her personal papers reveal that she 'suffered unendurably' from illness and 'ghastly depression', and after the war she often expressed the wish that she were dead.

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[55] As Roe notes, Franklin was writing a lot, but 'strenuous efforts to publish accumulated American writing and wartime manuscripts were unavailing; and no one wanted to try her plays': vol I, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[56] Letter to Beatrice Davis from Miles Franklin, September 1952, quoted in Roe, vol II, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

[57] Quoted in Roe, vol I, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

[58] Roe, vol II, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

She struggled to 'put down' her illness and depression, and forcefully filled her life with hard work, and lessons of all kinds: shorthand, French, speaking, and singing. She was continually going to the theatre, even more so than when living in Chicago—her diary entries recording theatre outings are far too numerous to include. Although her life was not without romance, and was full of friendships, Franklin found life a chore.[59] She seemed to save most of her jolliness for her plays.

ENGLISH PLAYS

Reminiscing about London, Franklin wrote to Mary Fullerton that: 'Times do eat into us, but we had those lovely days of inspiration and association and the feasts of culture provided by old London and they can not be taken from us'.[60] That feasting and 'inspiration' resulted in Franklin's London plays, some of which are considered briefly here. They reveal both continuity and difference from her American plays, demonstrating a maturing feminism and understanding of dramatic form. Exploiting this understanding, Franklin often curtailed to the hegemony of mainstream theatre. These compromises were not without cost to her aesthetic principles or feminist philosophies, and this cost was subsequently reflected in the quality of the plays. Rather than providing an opportunity to lament Franklin's 'failures' as a playwright in London, the stories of these plays—how and why they were written and marketed—provide an opportunity to recognise in what ways an Australian pioneer feminist playwright negotiated her way in a foreign theatre world.

Somewhere in London

Franklin began writing *Somewhere in London* in the winter of 1916, and by late August she had read it to a group of friends who found it 'entertained vastly'.[61] A comedy in four-acts set in London, this play is a unusual war drama, peopling the stage with Australian female painters, Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (ANZAC) soldiers, stray American soldiers, a nurse, and a host of odd extras. Franklin harnesses the genre of war

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[59] See for example Franklin's 1918 diary (FP: ML). Although she suffered her worst times during the war, her malaise continued long afterwards.

[60] Miles Franklin to Mary Fullerton, May 1934, quoted in Roe, vol. II, *op. cit*, p. 230.

[61] Diary entry, 31 August 1916 (FP: ML).

drama to both feminist and nationalist c ends. She subverts both the traditional romantic conclusions of comedy, and the normal concerns of London audiences by including Australian soldiers directly in the action, and raising their profile in the heart of the British Empire. Franklin wasted no time, so soon after Gallipoli, attempting to dramatise the ANZACs and confronting English audiences with that image.

Somewhere in London presents a story of two Australian women painters living and working in London, one older and successful, the other just starting out. They are forced to deal with both their past and present loves. The play is as much a comment on professional women as it is on war. Throughout the horrors of the war, which provide the play's backdrop, the characters strive hard to maintain life's normalcy and balance, but they are continually rocked by bombs, or threats thereof. The play ends as the characters survive another bomb blast but, in a classic example of feminist non-closure, the response to the marriage proposal remains a secret.

One undated, unsigned criticism of *Somewhere in London* had this to say about the play:

> There is a lot of excellent stuff in this. Somehow it seems very alive and real. Yet...I do not think it will do as a play, for it is not really a play at all, just a string of incidents...it has no form or construction: the talk is too long winded and undramatic...No manager would accept the play for production, but they would all write a very nice letter of encouragement to the author, for he [sic] certainly should be able to write a play some day, as his [sic] ideas are so refreshingly alive.[62]

Other compliments included praising the 'distinctly well drawn' characters, which was always a strength of Franklin's dramatic writing. This reader made further suggestions that Franklin chose not to respond to, for example, the comment on the characters' conversations. Considering that Franklin laboriously reworked all of her scripts, this suggests that she did not agree with such criticisms. The 'string of incidents' condemnation is particularly revealing. Theatre managements had exact ideas about what theatre was, and Franklin did not fit that idea. The construction of *Somewhere in London* is not conventional, it is episodic and has an impelling pace.

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[62] 'Miscellaneous Newscuttings/Letters received' (FP: ML).

Unimaginative direction could result in a production of *Somewhere in London* suffering from melodramatic overload The seeming innocence or innocuousness of the play, though, could be knocked out in a compelling staging. It could work very well, for example, as a historical piece. Perhaps the whole atmosphere of the theatre could reproduce a war feel—right down to the ushers, program sellers, and music. The ushers might be actors, and could assume their roles on stage after the audience is seated. The result could be quite effective and the audience may well enjoy a journey into a different feminist world. This willingness to take a journey is the only demand that Franklin ever places as a playwright.

By Far Kajmacktchalan

'A Tale of the Balkan Front today', Franklin wrote this play during 1917 whilst on war service in Serbia. She enjoyed reading it to her colleagues in the camp at night.[63] The play's action revolves around two young American nurses serving in the Balkans, one a socialite, the other from a different class altogether. For fun, they swap identities to conceal their social status, but the game backfires when they both meet and fall in love with men who are considered to be outside their assumed social classes (one an officer, the other an orderly). After due consideration, conflict, and revelations, they both triumph to marry the men they love.

The four acts of *By Far Kajmacktchalan* are set in a Serbian camp with Mount Kajmacktchalan towering in the background. Franklin provides detailed sketches suggesting scenery and props. Sound effects include 'distant guns' that punctuate the afternoon siestas. The characters' costume list is precise, providing an imagery that contests the usual First World War hospital camp scenarios. Patients, for example, are garbed in 'a variety of striped dressing gowns of striking colours. Some wear Khaki wash hats, others the cap of the Serb soldier...One man wears a civilian coat and pyjamas trousers and a long-tailed nightshirt in full sail between. He is nevertheless the master of a flowing beard and imperturbable dignity' [1]. An index of the Serbian language is also

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[63] See diary entry for 10 March 1917, for example (FP: ML).

included to assist textual understanding, making *By Far Kajmacktchalan* an early and interesting example of an Australian multilingual play. Use of Serbian songs and traditional dances adds to the authenticity of the foreign atmosphere of the play. The veracity of Franklin having lived these colourful experiences is obvious.

Susan Cullen notes in her work on Australian war drama (which does not include a study of this play as she was unable to date it) that Australians at the front in Europe, as did other soldiers, enjoyed all kinds of theatrical entertainment. It is feasible that Franklin wrote this play to be performed as soldiers' entertainment. Cullen mentions that Millicent Armstrong, who served in France as a nurse during the war, also wrote plays whilst on active service 'using nurses, doctors, and wounded men as cast members'.[64] *By Far Kajmacktchalan* belongs to this fascinating and relatively unknown tradition of women's theatre history which adds a varying perspective to war dramas. In offering an alternate centre of interest than is usually found in war dramas written by men, women playwrights offer an unusual historical perspective on the First World War. The light-hearted plot of *By Far Kajmacktchalan* should in no way detract from the play's significance. Franklin's embracement of the genre of war drama reveals a very distinct treatment from that which the literary history of modernism has led many observers to expect.

Susan Carlson, writing about women and comedy within the British theatrical tradition, suggests that women's dramatic writing has a different relationship to modernism. She argues that because women have had different approaches to life in the twentieth century than men, they have subsequently approached the 'comic task' in their writing for the theatre 'with a combination of cultural and aesthetic assumptions that separate them'.[65] Carlson maintains that these different experiences of the twentieth century have in turn defined women's relationship to and position within modernism: 'Feminist critics who have examined the connections of women to modernism have

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[64] Sue Cullen, 'Australian Theatre During World War One', *Australasian Drama Studies*, vol 17, October 1990, p. 164.

[65] Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition*, Ann Arbor, 1991, p. 308.

discovered that the generally accepted literary milestone of 'modernism' is gender-specific and records basically male responses to the twentieth century'.[66]

Carlson cites the example of Sandra Gilbert's work to support this argument. Gilbert contrasts the effects of war on men and women, arguing that war was a negative experience for men, representing the end of hope and freedom. For women more than men, war meant new roles and outlooks. The result in literature has been the expression of male despair, which contrasts strongly with the female examination of new possibilities. What this has meant for modernism, Carlson argues, is that 'a hopeful comedy that flies in the face of standard contemporary judgements of comedy—judgements that privilege black comedy as the only real possibility for this century—is but one piece of the literary landscape women are changing'.[67] Regarded in this context, *By Far Kajmacktchalan* stands as an example of women's comic writing for the theatre that serves to deconstruct British dramatic traditions.

Franklin's comic treatment of life at the front proposes, through her organisation of characters, new configurations which in turn supports change for real women. Although the play concludes in the traditional comic ending of marriage, Franklin has nevertheless revealed some revolutionary possibilities for women. Liberated from class constraints and social expectations, Franklin suggests, women could define themselves afresh. By implication, the women characters in the play could transport this liberation with them back into a postwar world. So too could the audience be inspired to disregard oppressive prewar constraints, and accept that women now enjoyed new freedoms. That freedom included the right to marry whom they pleased—if indeed they did choose marriage. Despite its traditional resolutions, *By Far Kajmacktchalan*'s women are indeed changed by the 'world turned upside down' experiences of their lives as led during the war. Risks were taken and individual rights were won. In this sense, the play paves the way for what Carlson sees as a major change in contemporary comedy, the change which resulted from the

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[66] *Ibid.*, p. 309.
[67] *Ibid.*

enfranchisement of the female subject, and the new possibilities for characterisation which that entailed.[68]

Although she contracted malaria and was seriously ill, and despite being exposed to consequent atrocities of battle, Franklin's experience of the war at the front was an otherwise positive and happy time. It is no wonder that she wrote a play that highlighted the positiveness of that time. Reflecting later on her Serbian adventures, Franklin hoped that her writing would throw a different light on women's war experiences:

> These comments of a camp cook on experiences gained as a voluntary member of the British Red Cross are submitted unpretentiously for what they are worth as documents of the war. With no straining after tragedy nor attempt to picture hardships, which, comparatively, did not exist for Red Cross workers on the Salonique front from July 1917 to Feb 18, perhaps they may serve to shew that black through the clouds, desolate the future, there is still sunshine and laughter.[69]

All of Franklin's writing about her war experiences—in particular the Serbian country and its people—has the feeling of high drama. It is as though she was undergoing the adventure of a lifetime; perhaps this tempered the atrocities she certainly witnessed. The landscape in the play, for example, is presented as being both beautiful and dangerous. This excitement flavours the whole play which, despite its seemingly trivial plot, still manages to express strong political opinions about pacifism, and the effects of war on unsuspecting victims.

By Far Kajmacktchalan has a cinematographic feel to it. In performance, a production of this play could harness this atmosphere and at the same time relieve the possibly trite plot by embracing a circus-like mode of presentation. Effective direction could result in analogies being drawn between the absurdities of war and the melodramatic pursuits of the lovers in the play, which could be singled out and their significance enhanced by a carnivalesque ambience. *By Far Kajmacktchalan*, an unusual if not major contribution to feminist writing of the suffrage era, is still worth experimenting with.

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[68] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[69] 'Nemari Nihita: Six Months With The Serbs' (FP: ML).

SOME CRITICAL ISSUES

Despite submitting under pseudonyms.[70] pulling all the strings she could, imposing on all her contacts, and writing pleading letters to leading performers of the day, Franklin met with no known success on either the American or London stage during the suffrage period. While it could be argued that his is justifiable given the quality of her work, the reasons for her failure in this arena are more complex. For example, much of her work was rejected because of its content (too political?), and its reliance on international language idioms and characterisation (too universal for the parochial English and American stages?). These are hardly faults of Franklin, nor do such criticisms legitimately condemn her work. She was familiar with contemporary theatre and public tastes, a seriously hard working writer, committed to learning the craft, well read,[71] and extremely ambitious. The application of these attributes in the pursuit of Franklin's failed dream to become a successful playwright tells its own story, one of significant relevance for feminist theatre history. This section considers aspects of Franklin's legacy to early twentieth century feminist theatre through an examination of some of her dramatic achievements.

Better than sex? Female friendship as an everlasting theme

Franklin is very opinionated about relationships between men and women, the boundaries of female friendships, and the rights and wrongs of sexual morality. These opinions are constantly expressed in her dramatic writing. On some issues she is adamant; the leads in every single play of Franklin's belong to female characters, and all of the most important things in her dramas happen to women. Franklin never dismisses a male character /argument/issue in her plays without first inviting that sensibility on stage and letting it

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[70] These included: Sarah Miles, J Verney, Botany Bay, Radio Bee, Coll Aborator, and Mr & Mrs O G Niblat.

[71] Franklin read widely on the art of playwrighting. See for example her September 1916 letter thanking Alice Henry for a copy Pelasco's work: '...just the thing I wanted...anything more in the line of instruction for dramatists will be received with equal gratitude', (quoted in Roe, vol II, *op. cit.*, p.110). Franklin also sought out union contracts and wage agreements concerning payment of playwrights. Her papers reveal information collected about financial details concerning contracts between playwrights in Britain and their producers. *The Bulletin* published details offering them as a guide for Australians involved in the same line of work. Franklin's papers also contained a copy of *The Minimum Basic Agreement, Approved by the Dramatists Guild of the Authors League of America*, dated July 1926.

reveal itself before trouncing it. Her writing at least includes other subjectivities before dismissing them—sometimes with hostility, but usually with comic sympathy. What remains are theatrical capsules containing intricate documentations of feminist sensibilities. Reading these texts as historical documents, invaluable insights can be gained into some of the many worlds of women during the early decades of this century. Franklin's plays are particularly revealing about women's friendships. Of utmost importance in her own life, Franklin paid homage to the solidarity of women and the profits of female friendships and networks in all of her writing for the theatre. Female relationships can therefore be described as an everlasting theme in Franklin's plays.

Writing to a dear friend in America from Australia in 1950, Franklin reflected on the beauty of her time in the States, and how much she valued female friendship: 'Affection plus intelligence is the most delightful mixture of friendship and friendship the warmest most permanent thing in existence'.[72] More permanent and substantial than her political work, Franklin declared the friendships and love she experienced in the United States to be the greatest achievement of her life. It follows then that her American plays, more than any others, deal with themes of 'intelligence' and 'affection' amongst women. It is perfectly appropriate and logical, for example, than the mistress and the wife in *Aunt Sophie Smashes a Triangle* should become fast friends and unite against the man that has wronged them both. Such resolutions are typical and indicate how Franklin dealt with female subjectivity in her dramatic writing.

Many writers have alluded to Franklin's love life in America, creating some vague impressions, but few have considered how her relationship with men, let alone women, may have influenced her writing life. Historian Diane Kirby, examining Franklin's journalistic writing, is an exception. Kirby has considered Franklin's relationships with men in Chicago, as well as her relationship with her colleague and fellow Australian Alice Henry. Franklin and Henry lived together for some time, with Henry nursing Franklin through her recurring illnesses. When Franklin went on a trip to Europe with (and paid for by) Editha Phelps, there was a letter waiting for her from Henry in every port of call.

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[72] Letter to Margaret Currey, March 1950, quoted in Roe, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

Kirby notes that although Franklin was 'constantly in the company of romantically inclined males' she ultimately rejected them all, satisfying other life preferences instead. This in no way precludes sexual experience on Franklin's part, with Kirby arguing that Franklin:

> ...at least had some sexual experience with men and entries in her diaries reveal many close contacts and possible erotic experiences with her woman friends: staying overnight, sharing their beds, and talking late into the night. Such companionship and emotional warmth was very much a feature of this woman-centred environment and Stella also had the support and indulgence of older women.[73]

Kirby provides a plethora of reasons why Franklin refused to marry other than her possible lesbianism or bisexuality, arguing that she 'may have been plain fickle; preoccupied with her career ambitions; [or] too much of a feminist to tie herself to males who could not meet her exacting standards'[74] (which is what both Franklin's novels and plays of the period also imply). These are more likely explanations than that of one historian who Kirby points out as implying that Franklin was 'too sexually neurotic to have an enduring, mature, sexual relationship'.[75] Whatever Franklin's reasons for remaining single, it is probable that she was not so puritanical as is suggested by her typical historical figurage. Further, and more important in this study of Franklin as a writer, it is apparent that despite her personal experiences, she was selective about what kinds of sexual relations she chose to explore through her plays. That selection was no doubt more conservative than Franklin's real life experiences.

One theme relating to women relationships and sexuality that Franklin did pursue was that of spinsterhood. Many of her plays include an older woman character, usually very attractive and smartly dressed, with a veiled romantic history and a varying reputation as an old maid and suffragette. Further, this character was often an Australian, a distant relative to those characters involved in the play's action in usually either London, New York, or Chicago. Casting herself, perhaps, as the wise protagonist in many of her plays,

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[73] D Kirby, *Alice Henry: The Power of Pen and Voice, The Life of an Australian-American Labour Reformer*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 92.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] Cassandra Pybus, 'The Real Miles Franklin?', *Meanjin*, no 42, Dec 1983, pp. 459-77.

Franklin positioned the spinster in a central position to all dramatic and thematic concerns of the plays. Pulling her in from the peripheral position normally enjoyed by spinsters in both the family and society, creating a new theatrical muse, Franklin placed the 'old maid' up there with suffragettes and other visionaries

Writing to an old friend and colleague from her Chicago days much later, Franklin reflected on her life as a spinster.

> There is one question I'd like to solve—why is it that in the most advanced nations, where women are in a slightly better position...so many of the finest women remain unmarried...I remember totting up without stopping to delve the names of 100 women with whom I'd had contact in the work who were all unmarried...who nevertheless were obviously attractive physically and mentally. It was the same in Australia...our three most prominent women were unmarried, two of them had been raging beauties.[76]

Contemplating this, Franklin recalls that there were in her own family many lovely 'old maids' aside from herself, and she regretted that she had never bothered to ask them 'why?' when she had had the opportunity. 'Someone', she said, should have 'gone around and questioned them seriously about thirty years ago'.[77] Franklin had in fact been asking that hard question—why marry?—in her suffrage plays for many years. Although her novel *My Brilliant Career* deals with this exact dilemma, it was more so Franklin's plays which demonstrated rather speculated the boon uses of spinsterhood.

Sheila Jeffreys and other historians have noted that: 'Spinsters provided the backbone of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century'.[78] Franklin recognised this and wrote about the spinster as a professionally ambitious and socially useful woman, one who was not an excruciating embarrassment or financial strain on her family. Spinsters have historically been considered as staunch virgins and devout moralists, but choosing not to marry was often a radical rather than a conservative action, and had little to do with upholding traditional moral or social values. Jeffries argues, for example, that 'A determination to transform male sexual behaviour was a predominant

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[76] Letter to Mary Drier, June 1948, quoted in Roe, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-10.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1931*, London, 1985, p. 86.

theme of the constitutional and militant suffrage campaigners in the intense phase of feminist activity leading up to the first world war'.[79] A random consultation of almost any of Franklin's plays reveals such feminist politics in action, where the traditional pitting of married woman's interests as being different and contradictory to that of the single woman is being deconstructed. Franklin exposes such divide and rule tactics for what they are, and represents through her characterisations the interests of those different women as being congruous. This is more often than not achieved through the employment of a comic form. As Susan Carlson argues, the power of comic plays by women depends on 'a theatrical recasting of women's sexuality and of their options for community'. Franklin's comic treatment of women's relationships in her plays is a feminist exercise because they propose, as Carlson hopes for feminist comedy, 'new configurations of comic organisation and characters which in turn supports revolutionary change for real women';[80] Franklin's plays are all about options. In this way, Franklin uses the condition of spinsterhood to achieve a dramatic milestone for suffrage theatre, contributing to the feminist dramatic tradition whereby female subjectivity is redefined.

There is sufficient evidence in Franklin's personal papers to create an argument that Franklin was a lesbian, despite her insistence that 'one could not enjoy one's friendships without this foul aspersion'.[81] It is worthwhile recalling that Franklin was fond of deceit, having orchestrated one of Australia's best kept literary secrets by concealing her identity as the real author of the famous Brent of Bin Bin novels. Franklin discussed at length the advantages and disadvantages of lesbianism with her close friend Mary Fullerton, an Australian expatriate writer living in London. She discussed Havelock Ellis's findings, and referred to her time in Chicago as 'those days of splendid experiment in breaking bonds [when] some women tried to stretch outside their capacity'. Franklin also commented that women who openly declared their lesbianism were 'cracked to come out'.[82] Yet other correspondence sees Franklin avowing chastity as a great virtue, one that she believed in—

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[79] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[80] Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
[81] Draft letter to Heney, March 1954, quoted in Roe, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 343.
[82] Letter to Mary Fullerton, November 1940. *ibid.*, p. 46.

'believe', and not 'practice', being the word she always used.[83] Only one thing is for certain, and that is Franklin's love of sexuality and women's friendships as dramatic themes.

In documenting what Franklin *did* do in her plays, it is worthwhile noting what she did *not* do. It is not the object of this study to ascertain Franklin's sexuality. What Kirby's observations, and Franklin's own comments, on lesbian relations reveal is that Franklin set clear parameters in her writing for the stage. Although aware of lesbian issues, and possibly even conducting lesbian relationships, Franklin never explored this theme in any of her dramatic writing. She censored herself even when writing to herself, using shorthand and codes to describe her daily life in her diaries, so it would be completely out of character for Franklin to confront such contentious issues as lesbian love or life in her plays. But as an issue of striking if peripheral concern to the women's movement of that day (and for a women who so valued and promoted women's friendship), perhaps Franklin's writing for the theatre suffered from this neglect (or unwillingness) to tackle morally contentious issues. Franklin might have found a niche writing more intimately about women's lives for fringe theatre, rather than taking on big (but 'safe') feminist issues with the mainstream stage in mind. Instead, and offering a rich feminist legacy, Franklin's plays reveal a world of admirable women dealing in an acceptable if confrontational manner with issues of political and personal importance to the women's movement earlier this century. These great friends and their great causes were of central concern in Franklin's suffrage plays.

Feminist dramaturgy at work?

The appropriateness of realism as a form for feminist drama has already been discussed, but it is worth reconsidering here whilst pondering the extent of Franklin's contribution to the development of the feminist dramatic form. Peta Tait reiterates here the gist of those earlier arguments against realism:

> The continued significance of realistic forms in theatre carries the tacit implication that it may be safer to confirm the existence of a recognisable reality which women can knowingly enter and inhabit, even temporarily like

[83] See for example a letter to Mary Anderson, December 1943, *ibid*, p. 105.

> the drawing room, and which can be left, rather than admit to a complete disruptive experience of social reality...[84]

Arguably, Franklin's plays—even in their subversion of form with feminist dramaturgy—did engage in this process of confirming a 'recognisable reality'. Many feminist theorists would agree that such a confirmation is not one that is beneficial to women. As those 'realities' should be exploded by feminist theories so too, some argue, should realistic theatre be deconstructed through feminist performance.

In defence of Franklin, and regretfully arguing against those theorists who are disappointed with realistic feminist writing for the stage, the representation of 'reality' in suffrage plays did not mean that women writers were scripting their own prisons. On the contrary, their precise capturing of the confines of the 'drawing room' operated more as a Holocaust museum might: it is not a place that victims care to return to, but it is a place that must be remembered and confronted for what it is. Without the operation of this historical memory, there can be no explosion, no revolution. The fact that Franklin and many of her contemporaries chose to conduct their dramatic arguments within mainstream confines, within the walls of realism and on territory that was clearly 'enemy', should not detract from the feminist achievements of Franklin's theatre.

Tait may be right, especially from a 1990s perspective, that 'safer' is not necessarily better. Franklin did indeed choose the 'safe' feminist option. As a conventionally attractive woman and a socially sought after suffragette she chose to market her plays in the same way in which she marketed herself. Her feminist boldness, however, was not diminished by this choice. Rather, Franklin's feminist politics thus suitably 'disguised' in 'mainstream theatrical drawing rooms', may have enjoyed a far better reception and reached a larger audience than otherwise. Regardless, simply reading Franklin's plays underlines their possible feminist power in performance. The way in which Franklin placed her feminist characters in the different conceptual geographies of the real world (as represented in her physical theatre spaces) proves that 'safety', or the preservation of an oppressive patriarchal reality, was not intended by Franklin. On the contrary, she intended the opposite.

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[84] Peta Tait, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Sydney, 1994, p. 40.

The presentism in much feminist criticism that judges the achievements of earlier feminists within the confines of contemporary criteria can be dangerous in that it mistakes and subsequently devalues feminist enterprise from earlier times. Tait's arguments are forceful and meaningful, but they have less relevance in a historical framework than a contemporary one. To criticise the employment of realism in feminist theatre today without examining its historical usage and importance to feminist theatre practitioners is to reduce feminist dramatic criticism, and the otherwise excellent arguments of Tait and other theorists who argue against realism, to a far less convincing position.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many ways to read a Franklin play—as feminist politics; as autobiography; as professional pieces aimed at the commercial stage—and these different readings add a texture and resonance to a body of work that has been wrongly disregarded. As her work in and love of the theatre demonstrates, Franklin seemed to believe that theatre was therapy for an ailing world, and she certainly believed in its 'endless possibilities' for transformation.[85] Franklin's expatriate professional life and dramatic writing place her squarely as a feminist and internationalist, and not as a quintessentially Australian nationalist writer, which is her traditional historical figurage. It is the international character of Franklin's feminism—particularised by her experiences of being an Australian which so informed her professional and creative sensibilities—which distinguishes Franklin's unique contribution to suffrage theatre

Franklin's devotion to the theatrical medium as her favoured form of expression is apparent in her commitment to local theatre upon her return to Australia. She was a long-time member of Sydney's New Theatre and as her scrapbooks reveal, she followed all the theatrical news and debates, contributing to the latter in her many public speeches on the subject. Collectively these indicate that Franklin was in favour of, as she put it, an 'Australian contribution to universal dramaturgy'.[86] Another story entirely, Franklin's

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[85] 'Essays & Articles', pp. 96-7 (FP: ML).
[86] 'Articles on Australian Theatre', *ibid.*, p. 253.

career as playwright in Australia took a new direction. Finally rewarded for her long apprenticeship as a suffrage playwright, she went on to become an award winning playwright.[87] Franklin was writing and submitting plays until close to her death; her love for the theatre and theatrical writing never waned.

Considering that Franklin's dreams of becoming a professional playwright were never fully realised, especially during the suffrage period, did she ever regret devoting so much time and energy to her theatrical ambitions? In a 1939 letter to a friend, Franklin lamented that she had given all her 'youth, my love years, financial security and everything else to the struggle for freedom consumedly', and that considering the state of world affairs where 'there is nothing but confusion', she thought all of this spent energy was to no avail.[88] Franklin regularly undermined the value of her suffrage and social reform work, believing that it had robbed her of devoting sufficient resources to developing her writing. As late as 1954, and despite her fame as a novelist, Franklin still felt this disappointment keenly: 'I have never gained self confidence and my writing fills me with a sense of tortured failure. Critics don't see the underside or innerness of what I attempt'.[89] It is hoped that this survey of Franklin's plays and examination of her quest to stage those plays has shed some light on that 'underside or innerness' of a too long neglected and supremely important facet of Franklin's life .

As Sylvia Martin has said of Franklin's life in London, the 'essential' Miles Franklin will not be located by researchers by simply going through her papers, but rather by 'focussing on the patterns and connections contained in them'. This, Martin argues, 'can add richly to our knowledge of the ways in which women negotiate their positions in the world'.[90] This has been the intention of this study of Franklin as playwright, which argues that Australian literary and theatre history, and international feminist theatre history, have much to gain by the incorporation of her story. One friend wrote to Franklin in the last

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[87] *Call Up Your Ghosts*, written with Dymphna Cusack, shared first prize in New Theatre's 1945 one-act play competition, and was performed in Australian capital cities. It has recently been published in Dale Spender's *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing*, Ringwood, 1988.

[88] Letter to Jean Devanny, August 1939, quoted in Roe, vol II, *op. cit.*, p. 17

[89] Letter to to Marjorie Prizer Holborn, September 1954, *ibid.*, p. 351.

[90] S Martin, 'Women's Secrets: Miles Franklin in London', *Meanjin*, Autumn 1992, p. 43.

years of her life pleading her to 'Please keep publishing. Please bring out your plays'.[91] A published collection of Franklin's plays, answering that plea of almost half a century ago, is long overdue and would delight historians and theatre practitioners alike.

[91] Letter from Ray Matthew, December 1952, quoted in Roe, vol II, *op. cit.*, p. 311.