Section A

AUSTRALIAN SUFFRAGE THEATRE

An Inquiry

AN INTRODUCTION

With Fidelity to Parameters of Dissonance

Secrets are the currency of power and knowledge. If memory is recognised as an important player in the recovery of secrets, then theatrical memory (read theatre historiography) is all important in the sharing or concealing of knowledge, and ultimately the control of power. Peggy Phelan is interested in theatre's 'intimate relationship with the secret', and how intelligence is created through that power. As Phelan says, 'For the critic to return to the performance is to restage and represent the drama of meaning's constellation and evaporation'.[1] When historians try and locate secrets about the past—seeking their own and other's empowerment—they are frustrated by the triple jeopardy of 'meaning', and its 'constellation' and 'evaporation'. These elements, which also comprise performance (and eventually become theatre history), mirror the triad of birth, life, and death. History is concerned with what lies beyond that ominous cycle: the memory of what once was. It is memory which provides the only counter to evaporation and death, and it is the quest for memory and the pursuit of secrets that occupies theatre historians. Bearing in mind that the pursuit of memory and its subsequent sharing creates new constellations of meaning, this thesis is particularly interested in the mysteries of Australian suffrage theatre history. It offers a story of the dramatic negotiations conducted by Australian feminist playwrights, who brokered many secrets in their own quest for power during the suffrage era.

WHY? DEFINING THE ARGUMENTS

Australian suffrage theatre is vastly different from its British and American counterparts, but its extraordinary contribution to the development of early feminist theatre has been underestimated and overlooked in both Australian and international feminist theatre histories. This thesis, however, is not meant to be a parable of disinheritance. It would be

[1] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, London, 1993, p. 112.

false to suggest that the traditions of women's theatre in Australia have not been felt by at least some members of feminist and theatre communities. Those traditions are indeed in operation, with the memory of feminist history creating its own contemporary rhythm. Nevertheless, the pulse of that legacy has been misread and mistaken by theatre practitioners and historians alike. Hence this thesis—skeletally, at least—is intent on redressing absences. A strict critical scrutiny has guided this process, questioning both the processes of disappearance and the problems of deliverance.

Due to the volume and quality of empirical evidence that (unexpectedly) presented itself, this history is inevitably 'a series of swift glides over very thin ice', a term employed by one of Australia's pioneer women's historians, Beverley Kingston.[2] She was apologising for not including a chapter on prostitution in her groundbreaking history on women and work in Australia. Kingston's own research revealed that there was far more to be written about than could be accomplished in one volume, and she hoped that in time her book would be nothing more 'than a quaint and primitive document, colonial in origin, and rather behind the times'.[3] Like Kingston, my research constitutes a much larger project than I had first imagined, and hopes to spur further research. I began with the hypothesis that there should be Australian suffrage theatre, expecting it to be disproved, or to find at the most only a few examples. There was in fact a large amount of writing for the theatre conducted by Australian women during the suffrage period, although not all of it could be classified as feminist or pro-suffrage. Indeed, there are too many examples to give them all justice within this thesis.

As a result, I chose to focus on what was to me the most appealing and revealing aspect of my research as it presented itself: the expatriate feminist tradition. This allowed a larger historical framework of inquiry, demanding international comparisons to be undertaken both within the area of suffrage history and women's theatre history. As a foundation for that comparative process, it was essential to understand the political, social, and cultural environments that Australian women were experiencing in Australia. Hence

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[2] Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, Melbourne, 1975, p. 149.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. i.

the first section of this thesis is devoted a survey of Australian suffrage theatre, and includes some playwrights who ventured overseas but eventually returned. The second section of this thesis concerns one individual only, Inez Bensusan, offering a case study of a playwright who best represents certain traditions in the cultural history of Australian feminism: internationalism, expatriatism, and a colonial confidence.

Even within the reduced parameters of my research, and as more and more evidence presented itself, the necessary selection process involved meant that much relevant material has been omitted. For example, it would have been profitable to compare anti-suffrage plays written by women, and to locate reactionary impulses in Australian women's history. Another notable absence is the lack of reference to any Aboriginal playwrights. Although there are examples demonstrating Aboriginal women's participation in the arts of European culture, no evidence has emerged which would suggest that they were involved with early feminist theatre's political negotiations during the suffrage period. These examples of many omissions that I have made clearly expose the risk that my chosen 'swift glides' methodology could perhaps reduce this study to a survey. I prefer to call it what it is, a beginning.

Chapter outlines

The distinctive character which distinguishes Australian suffrage theatre from its British and American counterparts is defined by three attributes: the 'post-suffrage' attitude of the playwrights, who as Australians were enfranchised women in a largely unenfranchised world; the expatriate impetus which saw so many Australian feminist writers directly responding to the internationalism of the women's movement of this time; and the influence and adaptation of trends in feminist theatre from abroad. It is these distinctions that are demonstrated and argued for in this thesis. This introduction will establish my methodology and discuss evidence before moving on to the major arguments of the chapters, the outlines of which are as follows.

Section A 'Australian Suffrage Theatre, An Inquiry', has four chapters. The first chapter, 'Suffrage theatre and the women's movement', is a contextual one, and provides a

brief history of the international suffrage movement, with specific reference to Australian perspectives. It serves as background material for the real exploration of the chapter: women's theatre and its use by feminists in the suffrage cause. When examining the distinctions between British, American, and Australian use of theatre for the negotiation of feminist emancipation, it is possible to locate and isolate national peculiarities. Moving on from definitions and comparisons, the second part of this chapter engages with theoretical debates about dramatic form and feminist theatre. The concept that realism (as employed by suffrage dramatists) may not be an appropriate feminist theatrical language is pursued; this leads to a discussion of the possible failures of some recent feminist dramatic criticism and theory—particularly for feminist theatre historians.

With the parameters having been set, the second chapter, 'International suffrage theatre in Australia', begins the examination of plays and playwrights themselves which dominate this thesis. It speculates upon the influence of imported dramas on the development of Australian feminist theatre, considering both individual plays and tours. Cicely Hamilton's smash-hit British New Woman play *Diana of Dobson's* provides an example of the influence on the Australian scene of international developments in women's theatre. A second strand of influence from overseas is seen in the creative output of feminists who emigrated to Australia during this period. Adela Pankhurst's controversial play *Betrayed*, written in exile, provides an example of this. Concomitantly, these examples underscore cultural and political differences between English and Australian feminists during the suffrage era.

The third chapter, 'Early feminist traditions in Australian theatre', concerns the development of feminist theatre from 1890 to 1920, and explores examples of women's playwrighting from this period for the first time. The relevance of that heritage is examined in both Australian and international contexts; and the feminist concerns of women's theatre in an enfranchised country are discussed. Beginning with an exploration of cultural anxiety as expressed in New Woman plays, this chapter pays particular attention to Mrs E S Haviland's play *On Wheels*. It then moves on to consider the theatrical enterprises of women university students of this time, and their flirtations with

feminism and the stage in a decidedly educated way. The chapter concludes with Katharine Susannah Prichard's suffrage plays, which provide an opportunity to demonstrate the unique face of Australian feminism dramatically expressed by an ardent socialist.

'Miles Franklin's early theatrical career' concludes section A. This chapter introduces Franklin as a suffrage playwright, arguing that her reputation as a writer needs to be reassessed in the light of her expatriate theatrical career and professed love of the stage. Although she met with little professional success as a playwright early in her career, Franklin's dramatic writing deserves considerably more critical attention and acclaim than it currently receives. Subtitled 'Expatriate feminist desire dramatised', this chapter looks at Franklin's personal, political, and professional life during her expatriate years, and considers the development of her dramatic writing in that context. It renders Franklin as the embodiment of the dreams, energy and endeavours of Australian suffrage feminists who pursued their writing ambitions overseas.

Inez Isabel Bensusan is the sole subject and case study occupying section B of this thesis. She is introduced as an Australian Jewish woman who is recognised as having played a leading role in British suffrage theatre. Bensusan's background greatly informed her feminism and career, but, until now, these aspects of her subjectivity have not been seriously registered. Her life in Australia opens this examination, which is comprised of three main areas. The chapter 'A nice colonial girl?' provides basic biographical information, covering Bensusan's family and education; her introductions to feminism; her early singing and acting career; and her probable reasons for choosing to leave Australia. This chapter concludes with a look at Bensusan's political convictions and affiliations.

Moving on to an interrogation of professional activities, 'Diversity at play' explores Bensusan's expatriate theatrical career as an actress, producer, and director. Bensusan's successful acting career gave her a thorough knowledge of the theatre industry, and a solid background to her later work as a producer and administrator. Given the history of English theatre at this time, Bensusan's foray into the traditional male reserves of producing and directing must be regarded as a highly politicised act. This chapter also

emphasises Bensusan's instrumental role in the success of the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), and scrutinises her role in and ambitions for their highly successful Play Department and her work as dramaturg for a entire generation of suffrage plays. The main focus of this chapter, and the primary argument for reconfiguring Bensusan's subjectivity, concerns the Woman's Theatre. There has been scant attention paid to the importance of this project, as it is generally considered to be a failed venture.[4] A more acute reading of the theatre's success, and an assessment of its historical context, sheds new light on Bensusan's dream. Why and how her vision was compromised guides this inspection. To conclude this survey of Bensusan's multifarious theatrical career, her involvement with the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company (BRADC) is investigated. The argument of this chapter is, demonstrably, that Bensusan was supremely qualified and uniquely placed to pursue a career as a playwright.

Bensusan as playwright is the subject of the final chapter; 'The suffragette speaks' provides a critical examination of her three plays *Perfect Ladies* (1909), *The Apple* (1909), and *Nobody's Sweetheart* (1911). The scripts of two plays survive, one of which will receive critical attention for the first time. Concluding this case study, the interesting turns that Bensusan's life took in her later years are summarised to complete this particular profile of an exceptional woman.

WHAT? ADVANCING EVIDENCE

Much of the evidence used to create the arguments of this thesis come from play texts. This reliance on the text as a primary historical source in the light of certain theoretical concerns has been of serious concern to me, but the observations of Ellen Donkin and others worked to alleviate those qualms. Donkin argues that 'in all areas of the theatre...women have made repeated efforts to establish a point of view that is different

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[4] Claire Hirshfield's article 'The Women's Theatre in England: 1913-1918' in *Theatre History Studies*, vol XV, 1995, is the most recent account of Bensusan's theatre. While an interesting report, some of factual information is misleading, and Hirshfield also fails to ask real feminist questions of her research. For example, historical events such as the war are accepted uncritically as the cause of the theatre's 'failure' to meet original expectations. As my treatment of this subject in Chapter Seven suggests, this was not entirely true.

from men', and that women's theatre history has special stories to tell.[5] That special difference was expressed most visibly in the redefinitions of female subjectivity conducted by women playwrights—hence my insistence on the value of the text itself for locating hard evidence of feminist interrogations. Although 'images of women' may seem an old-fashioned feminist enterprise, the shifting subjectivities of women expressed in the texts of this study reveal enormous amounts about how women negotiated their life positions during the suffrage period. Janelle Reinelt discusses the problems that historians of theatre especially have because of theatre's 'notoriously transient' qualities. She argues that those very problems of evidence offer a 'point of entrance for critical theory' that is actually advantageous in the quest for knowledge:

> As they reflect on the fragility of their subject matter, theatre historians struggle with the problems of historiography—theories of writing about history. Not the least of these problems is the absence of ... performance ... from the linguistic or pictorial residue of ... sources ... Perpetually reminded of irretrievable loss, then theatre historians should be among the most receptive to the theoretical problems of interpretation and representation.[6]

That perception is usefully equal when applied to dramatic texts themselves, probing, for instance, the feminist intentions of playwrights.

While I am unwilling to make any claims for the primacy of the text for theatre historians, I am equally unwilling to dismiss its real merits as a historical source. Reinelt summarises recent developments in theatre historiography and clarifies the origins of this conflict. She explains that positivist theatre histories focussed on the reconstruction of 'truth' which was believed to be able to be objectively obtained from reading facts, or sources (ordinarily, dramatic texts). The histories that emerged are testimony to how silences are ignored because of an absence of readable sources, and many players in theatre history were subsequently disenfranchised. Postpositivist theatre histories attempted to rectify this by focussing on non-literary evidence, assessing the means of theatrical of production through other historical evidence, for example, theatre architecture.

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[5] Ellen Donkin, 'Mrs Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth Century British Theatre', Reinelt & Roach (eds), *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ann Arbor, 1992, p. 276

[6] Janelle Reinelt's introduction to 'Theatre History and Historiography' in *ibid.*, p. 293.

As a result, there arose a dichotomy between textual histories and others, and it was up to theoretical intrusions to challenge that binary division. As Reinelt says, theory has challenged the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between literary texts and other kinds of text. I endorse this, and have attempted to read all historical evidence accordingly.

Texts other than plays have been similarly revealing sources for this study. Libraries in Australia, England, and the United States have been consulted, presenting evidence ranging from personal papers of suffrage activists to feminist publications of the period. Traditional sources such as mainstream newspapers have also been explored. Despite the breadth of research, all possible sources have not been exhaustively consulted; for example, it proved impossible, given the obvious constraints, to research British suffrage theatre on tour from the perspective of every single destination in Australia. Instead, I have offered 'snapshots' of experience that are meant to be evocative rather than representative, hopefully inspiring greater research.

In the Australian context, problems with evidence have a particular nuance. Comprehensive theatre history research is hindered by the lack or infancy of empirical research guides. For instance, there is no such source as Wearing's *The London Stage, A Calendar of Plays and Players*. Further, probably because of the relative youth of Australian theatre history and historiography, there are few guides to what theatre sources are in fact housed in archives and libraries around the country. There are exceptions to this generalisation,[7] but chance has played a large role in the discovery of relevant evidence. There is a lot of hard work awaiting more diligent historians to systematically document the wealth of theatre history sources and evidence across this continent.

HOW? APPROACHING THE PAST

What to do with the evidence was a much easier task than locating it. Treatment of sources has been entirely informed by my methodology which is perhaps best defined as materialist feminism. In Jill Dolan's words:

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[7] See for example *Guide to the Papers and Books of Miles Franklin*, Sydney, 1980 which lists all her plays and papers relating to plays.

> Materialist feminism ...frames the debate over gender in more gender-neutral terms than either liberal feminism, which would absorb women into the male universal, or cultural feminism, which would overturn the balance of power in favour of female supremacy. Materialist feminism deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations...Rather than considering gender polarisation as the victimisation of only women, materialist feminism considers it a social construct oppressive to both women and men.[8]

My faith for unravelling history's secrets rests on the beliefs expressed best by material feminism, hence my embracement of it.

Women's theatre history is a vital part of international feminist research, yet Australia has made a comparatively meagre contribution to this area of empirical and theoretical growth in women's studies.[9] While there have been some important histories published in recent years, little has been accomplished in the area of women's theatre history, although some vital research into this area is slowly coming to light.[10] The time for Australian theatre historiography to address that problem is well overdue. In order to understand how that might be achieved, recent developments in feminist dramatic criticism and theory are examined here in an attempt to define the methodological approaches which have guided the inquiries of this thesis. Although I clearly side with materialist feminism, other approaches have also informed my work.

Gayle Austin discusses the aims of feminist dramatic criticism and how it can be achieved:

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[8] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator As Critic*, Ann Arbor, 1988, p. 10.

[9] The work of theatre historians in this area is discussed more fully in the following chapters. I refer here particularly to publications such as Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981; Viv Gardner & Susan Rutherford (eds), *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, London, 1992; and Tracy Davis, *Actresses As Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London, 1991. Just as the impact of these histories extends beyond their specific subject material, this thesis hopes to have a general application on a broader level than merely the Australian context.

[10] For an informative survey of Australian theatre histories until 1988, see John McCallum, 'Studying Australian Drama', *Australasian Drama Studies*, nos 12-13, 1988, pp. 147-66. Josie Fantasia's 'Considering Gender in Nineteenth-Century Australian Theatre history: The Case Of Maggie Moore', *Australasian Drama Studies*, no 21, October 1992, pp. 155-168, exemplifies the growing interest in women's theatre history in Australia. See also my 'Playing With the Past: Towards a Feminist Deconstruction of Australian Theatre History', *Australasian Drama Studies*, no 23, October 1993, pp. 8-22, for an account of women playwrights' experiments with dramatic form prior to 1955. Peta Tait's work demonstrates the quality of research being conducted in more recent theatre history (see for instance her *Original Women's Theatre*, Melbourne, 1993). My point is that these examples are exceptions, and most importantly, that women's theatre history, less researched than other areas, continues to receive scant attention in major books on Australian theatre history which profess to be representative.

> It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some invisible mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor may have no clothes, the empress has no body. It means paying attention to women as writers and readers and audience members. It means taking nothing for granted because the things that we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women.[11]

This is clearly a questioning stance. Austin contends that feminist film criticism is fifteen years ahead of theatre criticism in analysing the construction of gender,[12] and others have made similar comments about how advanced feminist literary criticism is compared to dramatic criticism. There have been three relatively distinct stages in the development of literary criticism: (1) working within the canon, examining images of women; (2) expanding the canon, focussing on women writers; and (3) exploding the canon, questioning its underlying assumptions. Austin applies these recognisable stages of feminist literary criticism to drama, pointing out that because of the relatively late application of feminist theory to theatre, these three stages have been condensed and hence overlap in feminist dramatic criticism.[13] In Austin's experience, she believes that feminist *literary* criticism is best to examine the written play, and that feminist *film theory* is best for analysing performance.[14]

While there remains so much to be said about women in Australian theatre history, it would be easy to welcome untheorised empirical research. As developments in feminist literary theory have shown, that choice is not without its costs. Tracy Davis for example questions the revisionist nature of first and second stage feminist dramatic criticism, noting that 'the effort must not stop at rediscovering names and integrating them into the discipline, but must go on to challenge terms, periodisation, and categories of the scholarly tradition'.[15] Another problem with first and second stage criticism is that it relies on

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[11] Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories For Dramatic Criticism*, Ann Arbor, 1990, pp. 1-2.
[12] *Ibid*, p. 75.
[13] *Ibid*, p. 17.
[14] *Ibid*, p. 94
[15] Tracy Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History', Postlewait & McConachie (eds) *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, Iowa City, 1989, p. 63.

traditional methodologies that do not always benefit the stories of women. Susan Bassnett makes this point when discussing how it is that women disappear from theatre history. She sees the reliance of so much theatre scholarship on the written text—even though it is all too often the only remaining historical evidence—as a major problem. Bassnett argues that throughout theatre history 'acceptable' performers have worked within the conventions of the written text, and that by comparison alternative theatre, existing in the margins, did not. The danger of ignoring alternative theatre and making text-based theatre the object of historical attention is that 'the picture changes radically and women do indeed vanish from the stage'.[16] This then creates problems with terminology, where historians discuss 'first appearances' rather than 'returns' when examining women in theatre history.

Aware of these and other complications in feminist dramatic criticism, Bassnett and Davis both propose that the solution to these problems is the development of a new theatre historiography. To counter the dilemmas of revisionism, Davis offers a theoretical framework for feminist dramatic criticism which translates into organisational principles. Her guiding questions are: how does the ideology of the dominant culture affect women's status?, how do social class and economic factors affect privilege?, and how is the status quo challenged or maintained in artistic media?[17] Bassnett's solution is even more directive:

> We need some comprehensive work on women's theatre history. We need to go back into the archives, to look again at what was happening...We need to stop thinking about the 'exceptions'...and look seriously at the contexts in which those women were writing and the tradition out of which they wrote, accepting that the small list of names that we have could be very much longer. We need to reconsider the importance we have attached as theatre historians to the text-based theatre in the light of the role of women in the alternative theatre...We need...to examine in depth some of the implications of the discourse of male critics regarding the work of women.[18]

As theatre historian Charlotte Canning comments, while Davis concentrates on 'the interests that have obscured and erased the experience of women', she is not really posing

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[16] Susan Bassnett, 'Struggling With the Past: Women's Theatre in Search of a History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol V, no 18, May 1989, p. 108.
[17] Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
[18] Bassnett, *op. cit.* p. 112.

'feminist questions about women' but saying that women should dictate the terms of historical investigation. Bassnett, on the other hand, argues for 'reshaping the fields of inquiry to reflect women's experience and to abandon previous modes of history that have ignored it'.[19] This thesis hopes to begin from Davis' foundations of questioning and explaining obscurity, to move through Bassnett's reshaping advice, and to find grounds for a new kind of Australian theatre history. The feminist theatre practitioners of this study have been obscured in various ways, but at the same time they were part of an active tradition created by colonial women writers, one which was partly characterised by expatriate desire. That tradition represents some of the most profound expressions of feminism in Australian history. Therefore, perhaps the most important feminist question posed by this thesis is 'what circumstances made expatriatism desirable for what kinds of Australian women during the suffrage era, and why?' In answering that question, the focus on playwrights offers a particularly cultural emphasis to what is actually a wide political inquiry.

While Canning agrees that recent work in women's theatre history challenged traditional theatre historiography to 'understand periodisation as the organisation of value and meaning, to add gender as a distinct category in historical investigations, and to critique constantly the definition of what constitutes evidence', she maintains that it was the incorporation of poststructuralist theories, particularly deconstruction, which really challenged and changed feminist theatre historiography. Deconstruction has been the favoured weapon in stage three criticism which, as mentioned before, is intent on exploding the canon. The implications of deconstruction for the reading and writing of history are profound. Deconstruction as a philosophy of truth is disturbing to a profession (History) which has always assumed some correspondence between interpretation and fact, and between language and reality. The deconstructionist position which bothers historians most is the idea that no one owns meaning, which results in a collapse of the hierarchy of knowledge This is because if, as deconstruction professes,

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[19] Charlotte Canning, 'Working From Experience: A History Of Feminist Theatre in the Unites States, 1969 to the Present', unpublished PhD, University of Washington, 1991, p. 27.

textual meaning is ultimately undecidable, the privileging of one interpretation over another becomes impossible.

It is a matter of great interest and dispute whether contemporary feminist epistemology and praxis actually anticipated these ideas: 'There is, however, no doubt that it has raised equivalent questions about the adequacy of monodic systems of explanation', as Jane Caplan has emphasised.[20] The main theoretical statement that feminism has made is that reigning scholarly theories are not universally valid, and not fit to set agendas for entire professions.[21] Feminist scholarship has, furthermore, refused to fill this theoretical void, and advances no universals except perhaps that there are no universals. One feminist scholar has called this a philosophy that insists 'fidelity to parameters of dissonance' is more important than fidelity to a coherent theory.[22] Adherence to such a philosophy has allowed feminist scholarship to critique and incorporate many diverse influences, many of which are played out in the interrogations of this thesis.[23]

SOME HOPES

Elaine Aston, in her recently published *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, surveys the major critical studies of suffrage theatre history.[24] Although recognising the achievements of 'feminist intervention' in this period, Aston is reserved about the 'recoverist' tendencies of suffrage theatre historians, and how focus on this era tends to obscure women's theatre work between the suffrage movement and the women's liberation movement of the 1960s.[25] I am only interested in recovering lost practitioners insofar as they can contribute to the quest to understand the complexities of women's struggle for political and personal power. Theatre is simply the site of my inquiries. For similar reasons I am concerned to contribute an Australian perspective to suffrage theatre history:

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[20] Jane Caplan, 'Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes For Historians', *Central European History*, vol 22, Sept/Dec 1989, p. 292.
[21] Isabel Hull, 'Feminist and Gender History Through the Literary Looking Glass: German Historiography in Postmodern Times', *Central European History*, vol 22, Sept/Dec 1989, pp. 281-2.
[22] Harding quoted in Hull, *ibid*, p. 297.
[23] See for example Mary Poovey, 'Feminism and Deconstruction', *Feminist Studies*, vol 14, Spring 1988, pp. 51-65.
[24] Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, London, 1995.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

the movement was international, and consequently historical inquiries should respond to the challenge demanded by comparative histories. Political Scientist Carol Pateman laments that 'There is still an enormous amount of work to be done and I regret that my own discipline has contributed so little'.[26] With much profitable work already achieved and more underway, feminist dramatic criticism suffers no such regrets, but shares the responsibility of the work yet to be done. As Aston concludes, 'bringing the "lost" tradition of women's theatre history into view is an important political step if feminist theatre scholarship is to change the future of history at any stage'.[27]

Is suffrage history privileged? If so, only because it has left highly visible records, and because it is supremely interesting in itself. I agree with Pateman that 'The question of votes for women is all too often seen as a rather boring and insignificant matter. On the contrary, it is fascinating and complex subject, one that can teach us a great deal about political development and the structure of institutions'.[28] Suffrage theatre history, with these intentions in mind, should offer more than lists of wonderful women who worked in the theatre, or cheeky suffrage plays. Instead, an examination of suffrage theatre practitioners' repeated subversions of professional, political, and personal hegemonies should provide very valuable insights into women's struggle to become modern citizens.

Just as performance is never innocent of its audience, histories are not innocent of their readers. By exploring the work of feminist theatre practitioners who were actively engaged in dramatic renegotiations of their gender roles during the suffrage era, this thesis colludes in revealing the oppression that these women themselves were questioning. In so doing, it poses comparable questions that have a contemporary resonance: are things so very different in the 1990s? From almost a century's distance, this history reflects not only on women's historical struggle, but on feminist debates which still concern theatre practitioners today.[29] Although women's theatre history is a marginalised field, and even if

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[26] Carole Pateman, 'Three Questions About Womanhood Suffrage', Daley and Nolan (eds), *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, Auckland, 1994, p. 346.

[27] Aston, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[28] Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

[29] 'Does anything really change', asks Julia Pascal in her 'Introduction' to the 'Women in Theatre' issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol 2, part 3, 1995, p. 5. Pascal argues that women in European theatre are sorely done by, and that concerted political—even revolutionary—action is required so that power is evenly distributed throughout cultural establishments, which continue to operate along lines of sexual

women theatre workers continue to be marginalised by the exclusive hegemonies operating within theatre industries, women can take heart from the history of feminism which has long fought for the recognition, inclusion, and appreciation of difference. As Jacky Bratton insists, celebrating that process, 'in terms of cultural history, I have come to understand that it is in the margins that the best illumination is found'. That realisation provides the inspiration for this thesis.[30]

apartheid despite a century of intense feminist scrutiny.

[30] Jacky Bratton, 'Working in the Margin: Women in Theatre History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol X, no 38, May 1994, p. 131.

SUFFRAGE THEATRE AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

History and Critical Debate

This chapter does not intend to offer a comprehensive study of either the suffrage cause or suffrage theatre. In the British and American contexts, especially with regard to suffrage history, there are many excellent histories available.[1] Instead, this chapter presents snapshots of the Australian, American, and English experiences, highlighting how women used the theatre to further their feminist ambitions during the suffrage era. These pictures are the body of this thesis, and concentrate on the Australian experience with a particular emphasis on the contribution of expatriate feminist playwrights to the internationalism which characterised the suffrage movement. Through the inclusion of this fresh empirical evidence, the well-known face of suffrage theatre history is recontoured. This in turn insists on a reconsideration of the theoretical discourse that informs both feminist dramatic criticism and suffrage historiography. One aspect of this debate—the appropriateness of realism for feminist theatre practitioners—receives particular attention in this chapter, which begins with an examination of both suffrage and suffrage theatre history in order to understand more precisely the Australian experience.

SUFFRAGE HISTORY

So much of the history of the suffrage movement has been devoted to exploring when and how women in various countries won the vote. Citing these dates encourages a 'who won what first' mentality, framing the woman's movement of earlier this century as a competition. This sets up a false paradigm which detracts from the more important

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[1] In the Australasian region, see for example: Judith Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Melbourne, 1994; Patricia Grimshaw, *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1972; and Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A Gift or a Struggle?*, Melbourne, 1992. For North America, see for example: Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848-1869*, New York, 1978. For England, see for example Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford, 1992, and Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminism in War and Peace*, London, 1989. Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (eds) provide a useful 'Selected Bibliography on Women's Suffrage' in their *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*', Auckland, 1994.

questions of why women achieved the vote, and how this era of feminist history should be periodised. In this study of Australian suffrage theatre those questions are of particular relevance because Australian feminist playwrights were enfranchised women living in a world where women were still largely disenfranchised. For that reason alone it is worth contrasting the dates when suffrage was won, though far more comprehensive accounts are available elsewhere.[2] A brief history of the suffrage movement in Australia, Britain, and America is offered here in order to frame later discussions of similarities and differences within the international cultural feminist community of this time.

What the vote symbolised

The historical significance of the suffrage movement is of greater importance than that of female enfranchisement itself, and is revealed instead in what that victory symbolised. Campaigns against the suffrage cause—by women as well as men—are as revealing about what the vote symbolised as they are for the case of suffrage itself. The ideology of the suffrage movement was sustained by progressive feminists who asserted that great possibilities for social reform lay in their liberal visions, and it was this 'threat' rather than the idea of women voting, which created both the fears and aspirations characteristic of the suffrage movement.

Political scientist Carol Pateman, for example, argues that womanhood suffrage took so long to achieve because 'the franchise appeared to pose a radical challenge and threat not just to the state but to the powers and privileges of men as a sex'.[3] Those threats were articulated by suffrage playwrights, whose eloquent demands for the vote questioned that power. Suffrage campaigns, and suffrage plays as a component of those campaigns, were threatening because, as Pateman and others have explained, the vote was 'a potent symbol of all that was entailed in an equal social and political standing for women'.[4] Although the suffrage symbolised different things for various groups of women and men,

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[2] For the most recent and comprehensive compilation of a chronology of suffrage dates, consult 'Appendix: Chronological List of Women's Suffrage Dates' in Daley and Nolan, *op. cit*

[3] Carole Pateman, 'Three Questions About Womanhood Suffrage', *ibid.*, p. 335.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 336.

it represented a great force of change for all, and it was one that that did not end with the winning of the vote.

Recent revisions in suffrage history

Women in New Zealand achieved the vote in 1893, in Australia in 1902, in England in 1918, and in the United States in 1920, but these dates are not revealing in themselves about the distinguishing features of the struggle as it occurred in each country. Two important things about the Australian suffrage context are, firstly, that women's winning of not only the vote but the right to stand in Parliament in South Australia in 1894 was a world first. Secondly, that the gaining of federal franchise in 1902 excluded Aborigines. This discrimination did not end until 1962. In the American context, although women had been voting under certain circumstances in various states, and as early as 1776 in New Jersey (a right that was later revoked), women did not vote across the United States until 1920. Even then in some states Black women were excluded through discriminating tests and taxes. The situation in the United Kingdom was even more complex, with only married women, women householders, and women graduates over 30 years of age eligible to vote in 1918. Full suffrage was not gained in England until 1928.

The first entry point into to any aspect of suffrage theatre history should begin by asking questions about the standing of suffrage history in general. Ellen Carol DuBois frames an important question for historians when she asks why women's suffrage movements have so little history, adding that 'Even with the revival of modern feminism and women's history, woman suffrage movements have been a curiously understudied phenomenon'.[5] The cultural history of the suffrage movement suffers doubly from this exclusion, with the focus of what suffrage histories there are concentrating on parliamentary proceedings, political campaigns, and charismatic suffrage leaders. DuBois points out that as a result many suffrage histories reach disappointing conclusions about the women's movement of this time. She challenges the conservative hypotheses of much suffrage history which, although restoring women's agency to history by dismissing the

[5] Ellen Carol DuBois, 'Woman Suffrage Around the World: Three Phases of Suffragist Internationalism', *ibid.*, p. 252.

theory that suffrage was a gift awarded without struggle, still insist on the movement's fundamental conservatism. DuBois asks if this concession is necessary—answers no—and offers an alternative revisionist approach to suffrage history that instead argues 'woman suffrage has been, on balance, a progressive development, drawing on and adding to left-wing political forces, albeit frequently in an embattled fashion'.[6] The work of Australian suffrage playwrights examined in this thesis support DuBois' assertion.

It is these kinds of revisions that characterise the increasing complexity of suffrage history. It is hoped that this study contributes to that process of revision through the questions it raises about women theatre practitioners and their role in social change. For example, how many actresses did the limited English franchise of 1918 exclude? Women's war work is a reason constantly offered by historians for the achievement of suffrage. Actresses, as a professional body, worked extremely hard during and for the war, yet the bulk of those women did not profit from the limited franchise. Pateman has emphasised in her inquiries into why women won the vote that it is a myth that women were rewarded with the franchise for their work during the war. As she points out, this explanation so favoured by historians is not very convincing, especially considering that 'only women over 30 were enfranchised in 1918 [in England] when younger women had done most of the war work'.[7] Indeed, the three nations represented in this history had profoundly different experiences of the first world war, yet 'the war' is continually and misleadingly represented as having paralysed the Edwardian suffrage movement.[8] Pateman argues that it was changed attitudes towards the vote itself rather than women being held in different regard because of their war efforts which resulted in the passing of franchise bills: 'it seems that the fear of an electorate that included women had abated considerably by the end of World War I. Universal suffrage had become necessary to produce legitimate governments'.[9]

Revisions of suffrage history extend to questioning the categorisation of 'suffrage feminism' as a period in itself. Any periodisation of history runs the risk of applying

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 255
[7] Carole Pateman, 'Three Questions about Womanhood Suffrage', *op. cit.*, p. 342.
[8] For feminist commentary on the suffrage movement and world war one, see for example Alberti, *op. cit.*
[9] Carole Pateman, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

inadequate generalisations. 'Suffrage feminism' or 'first-wave feminism' are terms constantly employed by historians of the women's movement of this period. Australian historian Judith Allen articulates exactly how frustrating the use of such terms can be from the Australasian perspective. She points out that within the Anglo-American hegemony that developed in the writing of the history of feminism 'Australian and New Zealand women's history did not fit the mould. For fully half of the period currently designated as 'first-wave-feminism', Australian and New Zealand women had the vote'. Allen adds that 'This is a historical fact that provides a unique opportunity to test the dominant...interpretations in prevailing histories of feminism'.[10] Those hegemonies were well tested in Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan's recent edition of *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*. This publication marks a significant challenge to suffrage theatre historiography and the dominance of Anglo-American readings of feminist history. This thesis hopes to contribute to that challenge.

International comparisons

English and American histories of womanhood suffrage are most prolific, and it is the high-profile women and the very public campaigns of those histories that dominate suffrage historiography. Although recent feminist scholarship has successfully challenged that hegemony, those women and their causes were indeed high-profile, particularly the militant British suffragettes. These dramatic peaks of the suffrage cause do not, however, radically alter the character of suffrage history viewed as a whole. Many historians have chosen to focus on the fundamental unities of the international women's movement of this period rather than accentuating obvious differences and dramatic exceptions. Judith Allen, for example, argues that there were more similarities than differences within the suffrage movement:

> Despite differences of national and local contexts, however, the similarities between the preoccupations, rhetoric and intellectual influences within feminism in Anglophile countries are remarkable. Nationalist historical frameworks can obscure the extent to which feminism...was an internationalist

[10] Judith Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

> movement that built powerful transnational ties of culture and politics. Its leaders and members travelled, conferred, lectured, emigrated temporarily and permanently, wrote, read, emulated, boasted, exchanged crucial strategy materials, and sought and received advice, solace, criticism and support across national lines.[11]

Australian feminists certainly participated in those political and cultural exchanges, as will be demonstrated throughout this study To understand more fully the interstices of early twentieth century feminism, Allen argues that feminist histories need to move beyond 'parochial and particularlist studies of feminist movements in local frameworks', and take a lesson from their feminist forebears' interest in international comparison and exchange.[12]

Despite the constitutional variances of each nation's struggle, as well as cultural variables such as religion and particular circumstances which heightened feminist struggles—such as the anti-slavery movement in America—these differences do not distract from the common feminist visions shared by the suffrage movement as a whole. It was those common visions, manifest as an international feminism, that ultimately characterised the suffrage movement and excuse the generalisations inherent in any periodisation term such as 'suffrage' which, strictly, does not apply to 'post-suffrage' Australia, for example. The Australian feminists in this study, particularly the expatriates, constantly define themselves as suffragists concerned with international feminist developments that extended beyond national boundaries. In her 1911 farewell speech at Albert Hall, the famous Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein, who was visiting England at the invitation of the Pankhursts and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), said: 'I go to carry on our work...For it is *our* work. We suffragists are one all over the world'.[13]

The distinguishing difference of Australian feminists

If the suffrage period was characterised by its international feminism, then Antipodean women best represented the travelling face of that internationalism. Goldstein was only

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[11] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[13] Quoted in Janette Bomford, *Vida Goldstein: That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 114.

one of many Australian feminists whose travels can be regarded as international ambassadorship for the suffrage cause, and the expatriate playwrights represented in this study add a new dimension to that aspect of suffrage history. What did enfranchised feminists from distant colonies have to offer Britain or America? Audrey Oldfield argues that historians have not given Australia serious consideration when assessing suffrage history. She contends that 'The influence which the early vote in Australia had on campaigns in Britain and the United States, and the use to which it was put by overseas suffragists in their propaganda, are areas which beg exploration'.[14] This thesis attempts to respond to that demand for exploration of the international interplays of suffrage theatre. The way in which suffrage historiography, in general, neglects Australia is in distinct contrast to the reputation that Australian feminists enjoyed during the suffrage period itself.

As Raewyn Dalziel has emphasised, the event of enfranchisement in New Zealand in 1893, for example, was one of international significance for all countries where suffrage movements were under way. Dalziel notes that: 'This spotlight was also a searchlight. Suffragists and anti-suffragists abroad eagerly queried how the vote had been won and what changes it had produced' in the hope that 'hitherto inaccessible truths' about women's suffrage would be revealed.[15] Wherever Antipodean feminists went, they were subject to that spotlight. One of the advantages of this study is that it allows a useful comparison between other suffrage campaigners and post-suffrage Australian feminists who, as expatriates, were able to observe feminist movements in England and America from a privileged position. Playwrights such as Miles Franklin and Katharine Susannah Prichard, whose work is discussed in following chapters, had witnessed the winning of suffrage for Australian women, yet they lived and worked in countries where women could exercise no such rights. Concurrently, their unique vantage point allowed them to cast

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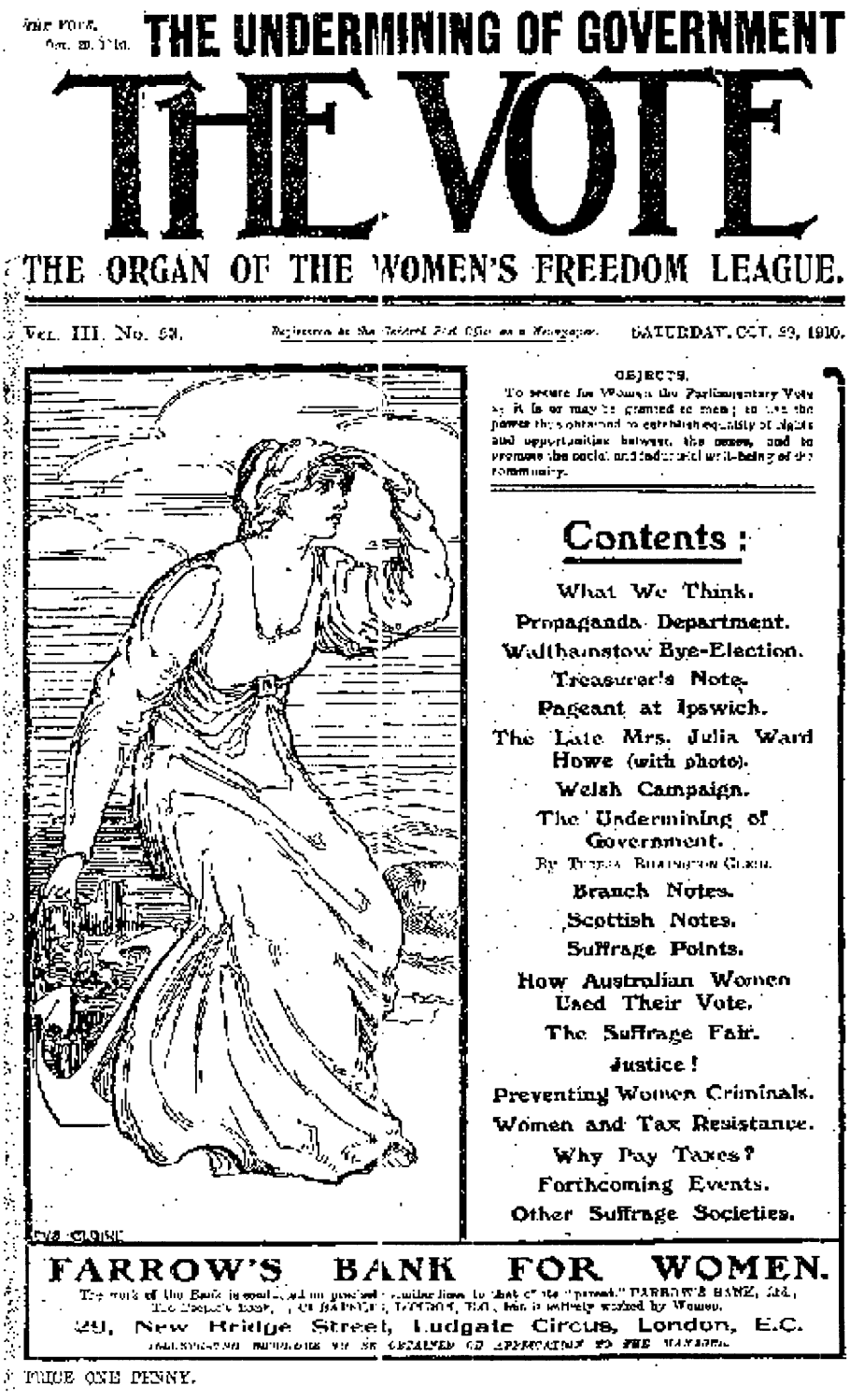
[14] Audrey Oldfield, *op. cit.*, p. 231. Oldfield devotes a chapter to a consideration of 'Australian Suffragists and Suffragettes in Britain and America', which profiles some notable expatriate Australian feminists. Though an admirable beginning, the purely purely political focus of this analysis barely begins to understand the rich texture or diversity of women's networks in international feminism earlier this century.

[15] Raewyn Dalziel, 'Presenting the Enfranchisement of Australian Women Abroad', Daley and Nolan, *op. cit.*, p. 42.



THE UNDERMINING OF GOVERNMENT

THE VOTE

THE ORGAN OF THE WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE.

VOL. III. No. 93. SATURDAY, OCT. 29, 1910.

OBJECTS.

To secure for Women the Parliamentary Vote as it is or may be granted to men; to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between the sexes, and to promote the social, industrial and well-being of the community.

Contents :

PRICE ONE PENNY.

Figure 1.1 *Cover page from a 1910 edition of the English suffrage journal* The Vote, *advertising 'How Australian Women Won the Vote'. The suffrage press paid particular attention to coverage of Antipodean developments (FAW)*

critical feminist eyes on post-suffrage Australia, and, in turn, apply these criticisms to their feminist philosophies and suffrage actions as expatriates. In 1919, from an England that had only seen a limited female franchise in operation from 1918, Franklin expressed some disillusion concerning women's emancipation: 'England perhaps once in the dim ages was a pioneer in baths, and has made herself ridiculous by imagining thereby she is still a bathing nation. I expect Australasia is going to do the same thing about women's emancipation'.[16] From her expatriate position, and after having supported militant suffrage struggles in America and Britain, Franklin often wondered if the vote had been wasted on Australian women. Such negative assessments were not Franklin's alone,[17] but they do provide an example of Australian women's unique 'post-suffrage' contribution to the suffrage campaigns they were directly engaged in whilst living abroad.

Such critical observations were more characteristic of the post-war period. Initially, Australian expatriate feminists were more positive about their citizenship privileges and status which were sorely missed once leaving Australia. Historian Marilyn Lake also praises the ambassadorial qualities of Australian feminists who championed their status as enfranchised women:

> Their distinctive status in the first decades of the twentieth century rendered Australian and New Zealand women political exemplars, lending them an authority as experts on women's citizenship. They travelled, they advised, they consulted. They extended sympathy, advice and assistance to their 'enslaved' British and American sisters.[18]

One thing that suffrage histories continually neglect is the cultural content of that ambassadorship, particularly that of Australian expatriate women writers. Lake argues that 'feminist activists should be recognised as pre-eminent among the theorists of citizenship'.[19] I would extend that argument to include the contribution of the artistic feminist community which so uniquely articulated those theories in cultural forms. DuBois observes of the suffrage movement that 'It is hard to believe that a political

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[16] Miles Franklin quoted in Judith Allen, *op cit.*, p. 222. Letter from Franklin to Rose Scott, 28 December 1919.
[17] See *ibid.*, for similar criticisms, pp. 222-223.
[18] Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old Worlds and New: Feminist Citizenship, Nation and Race, and the Destabilisation of Identity', Daley and Nolan, *op. cit.*, p. 278.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

movement of a similar variety, magnitude and duration that involved men would be treated so cursorily'.[20] That cursory treatment is amplified when considering the neglect of historians in general to acknowledge the cultural dimensions of the suffrage movement.

Lake goes on to document the ongoing struggles of Antipodean feminists in the 'post-suffrage' era. It is the dramatic presentation of those issues by both expatriate feminists in unenfranchised countries and playwrights at home which distinguishes Australian suffrage drama from British and American examples. Just as Australian women with the vote moved on to focus on others issues of citizenship in their feminist campaigns such as wages, equal opportunities, women's sexuality, marriage, economic status, and political identities, so too did Australian women playwrights focus on those issues in their work. Each of the playwrights considered in this thesis grapples with what would be classified as 'post-suffrage' concerns.

Feminist expatriate desire

Before moving on to concentrate on suffrage theatre history itself, it is important to acknowledge that Australian feminists did not simply pack their bags and embark on selfless journeys as suffrage missionaries, regardless of what status was conferred upon them by British and American suffragists. 'Expatriate desire' has been a preoccupying theme of Australian studies, particular of literary history. The Australian women playwrights examined here are part of a tradition of expatriatism which dominated this period of Australian cultural history. Much attention has been devoted to a study of this expatriate phenomenon by a wide range of Australian histories,[21] and there is insufficient space here to engage properly with the issues informing that debate. Instead, I will focus on how expatriate desire influenced women theatre practitioners' professional decisions during the suffrage period.

Pamela Payne-Heckenberg's study of women of the Australian theatre concentrates on the achievements of women of at home, but nevertheless acknowledges that it is

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[20] Ellen Carol DuBois, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

[21] See for example Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles At Home: Australian Women Writers 1920-1945*, Sydney, 1981.

necessary to take account of those women who were 'essentially expatriate' in order to frame the success of women who remained in Australia: 'it seems necessary to look at the Australian cultural climate that made it necessary for these women to leave this country to find the recognition and professional fulfilment they deserved'.[22] While Payne-Heckenberg laments that these women were forced to seek recognition for their talent overseas, she finds no evidence, however, that suggests 'the Australian public's scepticism of home-grown talent was specifically directed towards either women or the theatre: it was pervasive'.[23] Despite this, the expatriate exodus was 'of such significant detriment to the theatrical profession and to women within that profession' that it cannot be ignored when considering Australian theatre history.[24]

Payne-Heckenberg goes on to argue that because women have been historically less mobile than men, the expatriate impetus can be regarded as covert discrimination against women. There were positive benefits, however, including the subsequent global, mobile feminist movement within the theatrical professional, and the bonuses that such interchanges produced. Payne-Heckenberg acknowledges that those Australian performers who did leave because they had no choice often benefited enormously, and would probably never have received the training and opportunities in Australia to become as successful, for example, as Dame Nellie Melba did.[25] The majority of Australian performers, perhaps not aspiring to anywhere near such professional 'heights', left, as Payne-Heckenberg notes, 'because they had no choice; because, in their own country, doors were flung wide open for overseas reputations but slammed resolutely, and it seems haphazardly, in the faces of all but a very few local performers'.[26] Although the suffrage women playwrights of this study were respected as notable feminists during their expatriate lives by their British and American sisters, it is important to remember that their expatriate desire was informed by complex circumstances. Despite the contributions these Australian women made to the development of international feminism, their decision to

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[22] Pamela Payne-Heckenberg, 'Women of the Australian Theatre', *Australasian Drama Studies*, vols 12 & 13, 1988, p. 131.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 133.
[26] *Ibid.*

leave perhaps had more to do with their colonial experiences as artists than with their ambitions as global feminists.

This exercise in comparison has its limitations. As stated earlier, because continuity and change within the feminist movement of this time happened before, during and after the vote, the citing of the dates when suffrage was won offers little more than a series of artificial stop points. The suffrage cause did not end in America in 1920 while some states continued to exclude black women from the vote. It did not end in England with the limited franchise of 1918 but continued for another decade. In Australia, 1902 as a victory year belies the fact that white women in some states could only vote at federal and not state elections, and that Aboriginal women struggled to win the franchise for six more decades. It was when franchise was won and the suffrage battle concluded that the real feminist battles often began. If the vote was a symbol then citizenship was a reality—one that continued to disappoint women and angier feminists with its results. Australian women, enfranchised 'early', were more aware of this than their American or British sisters, and this awareness informed the politics and writing of Australian feminists and the way in which they conducted themselves as expatriates.

SUFFRAGE THEATRE HISTORY

Suffrage theatre history provides an exciting case study for the history of feminism and its quest for change. Its entry into theatre history in particular, and women's theatre history's entry into feminist historical scholarship in general, is relatively recent. Perhaps because of this, women's theatre history suffers from the reputation that theatre history and theatre studies in general holds within the academy. That reputation has been explained and is increasingly being amended by various commentators.[27] Rather than pleading a special case for suffrage theatre history, it is offered here as an example of feminist theatre history's ability, in general, to make useful contributions to the history of feminism.

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[27] For an informative summary of this situation, which Sue-Ellen Case and others have articulated, see Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, London, 1995, pp. 2-5.

Much energy is devoted to defining and debating suffrage theatre here and elsewhere. This enterprise reflects those same energies that suffrage women themselves spent debating the terms and meanings of feminism as they understood it. Historian Barbara Caine argues that those debates, beginning in the 1890s and continuing throughout the suffrage period, 'served not so much to centralise feminist ideas as to exhibit their range, diversity and complexity'.[28] That same exploratory energy, when devoted to suffrage theatre history, reveals similar complexities, the diverse nature of which only contributes to the tradition of locating, recognising and appreciating difference within feminist history.

Some definitions

To begin with a definition of what makes theatre *feminist* theatre might be useful. Feminist theatre is characterised by three aims: to improve the condition of women as theatre workers; to change the representation of women in plays; and to consolidate an experimental and combative alternative theatre movement. Feminist theatre critics such as Michelene Wandor have pointed out that the role of women in theatre is contingent on how images of sexuality are represented. Feminist theatre theory also argues for structural alternatives, including the collective scripting of plays and the rejection of the linear style of classical theatre.[29] Theatre history has also been deconstructed by feminists.[30] What then defines the feminism of suffrage theatre?

As mentioned earlier, the Australian situation makes historical categorisations problematic. Australian female suffrage was achieved decades before it was in Britain and America: what feminist theatre drama written by Australian women, then, should or could be rightly classified as suffrage drama? For the purpose of this study, the following defining characteristics have been adopted: the play must have been written by an Australian woman and performed or read in front of an audience that lived in a time when women were actively seeking the vote. The time frame is roughly from 1890 to 1920. This

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[28] Barbara Caine, 'Women's studies, feminist traditions and the problem of history', Caine & Pringle, (eds), *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, Sydney, 1995, p. 6.
[29] This definition is from Maggie Humm's *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, London, 1989.
[30] See for example Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, London, 1988.

means, for example, that Franklin may have written a play about women's rights (not *necessarily* the vote) whilst living in Chicago where women were not then enfranchised.

Sheila Stowell's work on feminist playwrights of the suffrage era, *A Stage of Their Own*, also provides some useful definitions for suffrage drama. She describes it as a species of 'agitprop' drama that thrived from 1908 to 1914.[31] Both the agitprop stylistic definition and the time frame offered are defining characteristics peculiar to the English situation. Not all feminist drama of the suffrage period was intended to be played to packed halls attempting to convert both men and women about the merits of female emancipation. Especially in enfranchised Australia, feminist playwrights had a vastly broader political agenda—one which befitted their different political status—and this was reflected in the content, style and venues of their theatre. Perhaps just as recent developments in suffrage history have seen feminist scholars revising Anglo-American hegemonies to incorporate Antipodean experiences, so too should the strict definitions of suffrage drama be revised when a larger canvas of feminist theatrical activities during the suffrage area is taken into account.

Despite problems of categorisation which Stowell's definition presents, her observations are illuminating. For example, she acknowledges the diverse character of suffrage drama, which did not only concern itself with the vote. She argues that suffrage drama was a kind of theatre which presented both:

> obvious arguments for female enfranchisement but also plays that dealt with more generalised portrayals of women's experience. These included both representations of women's continuing victimisation within the existing social and political system...and celebratory renderings of current and potential accomplishments.[32]

Although recognising the diversity of suffrage drama by not limiting her research to works which simply dealt with the vote, Stowell still places definitional limitations on suffrage drama. The plays included in her study were selected, Stowell said, because of 'the auspices under which these plays were produced, not their specific content'.[33] Those

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[31] Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992, p. 2.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

auspices were very different in Australia, and for that matter America, and therefore suffrage drama should not be defined alone by Stowell's uniquely English observations. Rather, they can be used for what they are, excellent denotations of English suffrage theatre, and as a solid foundation for further inquiries into feminist theatre of this period.

The unique face of English suffrage drama

To quote Stowell, suffrage drama stands as 'both a condemnation and a challenge: a condemnation of twentieth century patriarchy and a challenge to construct feminist alternatives, social as well as theatrical'.[34] Most English suffrage plays are short one-act works, often designed to contribute to an afternoon or evening program of events organised to support the suffrage cause. Stowell suggests that were two main types of suffrage play, either the 'Gritty social drama designed to expose women's victimisation within a social hierarchy that habitually de-valued them', or the farce, which 'attempted to destroy through laughter the positions of suffrage opponents'.[35]

These ideals were made possible in England by two important bodies: the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL), formed in 1908; and the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), which also held its first public meeting in 1908. The AFL recognised the marketing power of suffrage theatre and opened a play department under the direction of Inez Bensusan, an Australian. Bensusan, a playwright herself, oversaw the writing, collection and publication of suffrage drama (these and other aspects of her work will be discussed more fully later). Further, Edy Craig founded the Pioneer Players in London in 1911, with the aim to: 'present serious and controversial issues in an entertaining way [hoping] to make audiences entertain ideas they might otherwise dismiss'.[36] Under these favourable conditions, feminist playwrights in England were able to use the public forum of drama as a point of entry into the political debates of the period, debates concerning the 'separate spheres' ideology which was being challenged by what has come to be known as the New Woman. As Stowell points out:

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[36] Christine Dymkowski, 'Entertaining Ideas: Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players', Gardner & Rutherford (eds), *The New Woman & Her Sisters: Feminism & Theatre 1850-1914*, London, 1992, p. 221.

> There is no doubt that suffrage drama was written as part of a consciously organised scheme to propagate political doctrine and advocate social and cultural changes which would contribute to the dismantling of a system based on patriarchal oppression. To that extent it is unabashedly feminist propaganda...[37]

This 'unabashed' theatre was made possible in England by two major distinctive features. Firstly, the highly organised struggle for the vote—unique to the British situation—brought together women and theatre and politics together in a structured, public, and effective manner.This does not imply suffragists were disorganised in America or Australia, but Edwardian English women experienced supremely constructed campaigns that did not characterise either the Australian or the American experiences. The AFL, largely responsible for this coalition of art and politics, was a uniquely British construct.

Secondly, the suffrage play arrived at a point in time in British theatre history where non-commercial theatre was penetrating the cultural hegemonies which had so long dictated theatrical tastes. Claire Hirshfield recognised this when she pointed out that suffrage drama was the younger cousin to the experimental and intellectual theatre that had been seen since 1904 at the Royal Court, and earlier at the Independent Theatre and the Stage Society.[38] This meant that suffrage drama enjoyed the profits won by these new theatrical enterprises, which included the benefits of new writers, performers, and audiences. For example, Hirshfield contends that women started to attend the theatre simply for the sake of the play and its ideas: 'Feminism...had begun to inspire a new individuality and to breed a generation of young women avid for intellectual stimulation, who plainly preferred Shaw...to...the West End'.[39]

Stowell also cites the traditions of British theatre as having defined the possibilities of English suffrage drama, particularly in the case of the pageantry associated with the AFL and major suffrage rallies. She uses the example of Cicely Hamilton's *Pageant of Great Women* (1909) as a play which drew upon: 'England's rich tradition of politicised

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[37] Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
[38] Claire Hirshfield, 'The Suffragist as Playwright in Edwardian England', *Frontiers*, vol 9, no 2, 1987, p. 1.
[39] *Ibid.*

street theatre and civic pageantry'.[40] Stowell also explains other factors which contributed to the character of English suffrage drama, for example, the patronage by male 'feminist' playwrights such as Shaw who were wealthy and established in the theatrical profession. Once again, these opportunities did not present themselves in Australia.

The demise of British suffrage theatre is usually attributed to both the advent of the first world war in 1914, and the winning of the limited franchise in 1918. Stowell suggests that the agitprop character of suffrage drama appeared redundant in this light: 'deprived of its suffrage context [it] lost much of its urgency and ingenuity'.[41] The war certainly changed the specific focus of the AFL's activities, and affected British theatre in general, but perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on war as an explanation for the demise of suffrage theatre as defined by Stowell. Given the diversification and conflicts already apparent amongst many women theatre practitioners, and within the AFL itself, it is possible that suffrage theatre was already reincarnating itself without the traumas inflicted by the war. It is also possible that if a broader definition of suffrage theatre is embraced, one which includes more than the typical one-act agitprop AFL piece, then different accounts of this period of feminist theatre history will emerge. Suffrage theatre was not simply 'rendered obsolete by the swift currents of war time and by the passage of enfranchising legislation' as Hirshfield contends.[42] This becomes more apparent when considering the American and Australian stories.

American contrasts: suffrage theatre in a different domain

Most of the information in this section comes from the research of Ann Larabee whose unpublished PhD thesis, 'First-wave feminist theatre from 1890-1930', is the single most important document on American feminist theatre of this era.[43] Her work explores how feminist campaigns during the suffrage period incorporated the use of the theatre. This is revealed through a study of not only stage dramas and individual women dramatists, but

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[40] Sheila Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[41] *Ibid*, p. 154.
[42] Claire Hirshfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.
[43] Ann Larabee, 'First-wave feminist theatre from 1890-1930', unpublished PhD thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1988.

also suffrage pageants, theatrical rituals in women's colleges, and the crusading behaviour of certain suffrage organisations. Larabee's thesis argues that: 'Dramatic performances of all kinds provided an ideal way for projecting a new definition of gender...By staging themselves in radical ways, women questioned not only the image of the American Woman, but the language of aesthetics itself'.[44] Larabee claims that the history of 'first-wave' feminist theatre in America reveals that: 'Women discovered that theatre was integrally connected to political and social processes, and pragmatically used this understanding'. Through theatre they fought not only for the franchise, but for autonomous student government; against lynching; for the abolition of class systems; and for the right to freedom of sexual choice. In so doing, they 'left a legacy of new ontological and epistemological strategies' and 'questioned the social control over the creative process and the language of aesthetics itself'.[45]

Larabee's claims for the legacy of suffrage drama have been contested, particularly by Rachel France.[46] France argues, for example, that suffrage drama did not challenge theatrical form, and was in no way revolutionary: 'Since they advocated no drastic change in the political system...there was little impulse to develop new theatrical forms. Traditional forms, the well-made play in particular, were quite adequate for the purpose'.[47] Suffrage drama is 'strangely flat', suggests France, and has 'the emotional impact of plays written to instruct high school students in the virtues of patriotism...Like the agitprop drama of the thirties, they are often amateurish and naively polemical.'[48] Larabee's research contradicts these opinions, arguing that 'first-wave' women's theatre developed feminist dramatic strategies that revolutionised American theatre.[49]

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[44] *Ibid.*, p. 232.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 213.
[46] Rachel France, 'Apropos of Women and the American Theatre: The Suffrage Play', *Theatre History Studies*, vol 13, 1993, pp. 33-46.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Larabee's lengthy discussion of the work of women playwrights associated with the Provincetown Playhouse contests France's assertion that suffrage drama was not revolutionary. Susan Glaspell was only one of the important women artists associated with the players who confronted traditional theatrical forms with feminist dramaturgy. Larabee argues that Glaspell was responsible for a 'new strategy for dramatic realism, dovetailing new understandings of human psychology with mimetic setting and dialogue', which converted 'the everyday details of domestic life into a code for feminist dissent' [169]. Glaspell and other writers, Larabee points out, trained audiences 'to "read" female psychology as a violent, volcanic force underlying the most familiar props and exchanges'. Subsequently, 'Feminist discourse was thus naturalised as part of realistic form, a political tactic which made realism itself a site for struggle over definitions of

Less easily contested is France's argument for the fascism of American suffrage drama: 'in the light of other political ideas of the time...which could be labelled leftists, suffrage plays are, in effect, far to the right'.[50] France claims that the ideas expressed in suffrage plays were not congruent with the democratic ideals that the act of enfranchisement symbolised, and implies that they had 'much more in common with fascism' because they venerated bourgeois elitism.[51] If this reading of suffrage drama offered by France is accepted, then she is right in claiming that there are 'important implications both for scholarship on the women's movement and on the history of theatre'. France argues that American suffrage and particularly suffrage theatre history 'ignores the fact that the struggle for votes for women was often profoundly undemocratic'.[52] She concludes that:

> While we can appreciate the effort to make a worthy struggle appear to be the triumph of liberalism, suffrage plays force us to re-examine this assumption, as they reveal with great clarity, aspects of the politics of suffrage which have haunted the women's movement since its inception. The exaltation of social control prominent in the content of suffrage plays resounds in today's women's movement.[53]

This is an interesting argument, one that unfortunately loses credibility through France's handling of it. To begin with, France's definition of suffrage drama is very limiting: 'Suffrage plays were political drama with a single purpose—to get women the vote'.[54] Not only are France's dramatic examples of her own definition of the genre selective in the extreme, but more often than not she bolsters her arguments with extracts from other sources rather than from the plays themselves. This is misleading. Even if the suffrage movement was 'fascist', it does not necessarily follow that suffrage drama reflected those sentiments. This connection would be an intriguing one to pursue, and might reveal different grounds of feminist philosophical development which, for example, see women writers criticising the nature of certain suffrage campaigns. Further, Larabee's important

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gender' [192].
[50] Rachel France, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[53] *Ibid.*
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

work is sadly neglected in the construction of France's argument. Although France has made some important claims about the racism of white women and the undemocratic nature of the suffrage movement, it is difficult to be fully convinced of France's assertions after consulting Larabee's findings.

Larabee's account of the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1910s, for example, strongly counters France's claim that 'first-wave' feminist drama was supremely racist. The NAACP was particularly interested in producing propaganda against lynching, a perverse spectacle and unfortunate form of entertainment for many. Larabee provides an account of their theatrical activities, where, for instance, they sponsored black playwrights like Agelina Grimké to expose how lynching was 'an extreme manifestation of everyday acts of racial and sexual oppression'. Grimké wished to shock white women into an awareness that they were all—vote or no vote—still in the white man's prison of violence.[55] Larabee notes that 'even under the most sympathetic conditions' the relationship between black and white feminists fighting together for the vote and against racism was 'fraught with difficulties'.[56] Larabee's account, as opposed to France's, allows entry for a multiple-layered reading of early feminist theatre.

These examples demonstrate that important critical debates about American suffrage theatre are still developing. They also provide an opportunity to acknowledge the uniqueness of suffrage theatre in the United States. Both Larabee and France were concerned to show how British suffrage drama influenced American feminist theatre—which it certainly did—but they make no real claims for distinction on behalf their suffrage playwrights. There are, however, major features which distinguish American suffrage theatre. Women's colleges, for example, were a hotbed of feminist activity, as examples of student theatre testify. Many more women went to university in the United States than elsewhere. Another difference is one of sheer volume, with American suffrage dramatists having written literally hundreds of plays.[57] Publishing possibilities were also

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[55] Ann Larabee, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

greater in the United States than elsewhere, not only because of the large population (readership), but because, unlike England and Australia, America was not subject to the strict paper limitations due to wartime financial constraints.

Another unique feature of American suffrage theatre was the active involvement of black women. Issues of racism and black emancipation played a definitive role in the American suffrage movement, and this is reflected in the dramatic literature. The experience of war defines yet another peculiarity; America did not enter the first world war until 1917. Unlike England where the suffrage movement was thrown into crisis in 1914, suffrage theatre had a longer and different run in America. Meanwhile, Australian women were casting their votes in conscription referendums and writing peace plays.[58] By 1917 in America, '...both suffragists and antis were grappling with the new threat to the American ideal—immigration'.[59] This, too, was an appealing theme to suffrage writers, as Franklin's experience in America will demonstrate in a later chapter. Australia, by contrast, did not experience massive immigration until after the second world war. Political and artistic feminist leadership was also different in America. The militant forefront of the American suffrage movement, the Women's Party (WP), which endorsed political theatre, was not formed until 1914, unlike the AFL which was formed in 1908 and was closely linked with the militant WSPU from its beginning. Although there were individual bodies, such as the College Equal Suffrage League of Northern California,[60] which did limited touring and did have a dramatic committee, this by no means matches the magnificence of the AFL. Neither America nor Australia had such a national organising body running a professional business and providing standards. It is perhaps because of this leadership, and its concomitant censorship, that, as France claims, 'English suffrage plays never became as aggressive or as candid as their American counterparts'.[61]

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[58] Sue Cullen, who has written extensively about Australian war drama, observes that plays promoting peace were rare during the war. However, women's peace groups encouraged such writing. Mary Fullerton's *Punch and Judy Modernised*, for example, was produced by Vida Goldstein's Women's Peace Army at a joint celebration of the first Hague Conference. See 'Australian Theatre During World War One', *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 17, 1990, p. 176. Adela Pankhurst's peace play *Betrayed* is discussed at length in the following chapter.

[59] Rachel France, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[60] See *ibid.*, for an account of this organisation.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Larabee cites three main reasons for the demise of American feminist theatre in the 1920s: the writers, the audience, and the spirit of the times, which had all changed during the suffrage period. In a period of general decline in the theatre anyway, the now enfranchised suffragists 'settled back into their communities, and the pageant became a lost form'. Feminist playwrights pursuing other political causes such as racism became disillusioned with their inability to reform audiences and stopped writing altogether. Also, some influential women left America (including Susan Glaspell); theatres were turned into dance schools; and society became less interested in the-one time novelty of the New Woman and feminism and instead tried to control them.[62] These various and intriguing reasons offered by Larabee go much further towards an understanding of the workings of early feminist theatre than those of 'the war' and 'the vote' offered in the English context. Even more complex, from some points of view, than the American situation was the Australian one.

Beyond suffrage theatre? The Australian experience

Australian suffrage theatre has an individuality that, once acknowledged, will challenge feminist theatre historiography. This section provides a preview of that individuality, one that will be more fully explored in subsequent chapters. To begin with, it is useful to note the unusual conditions and beliefs which characterise and inform Australian theatre history in order to appreciate the feminist input into that tradition. Not only did Australia experience some of the world's best theatre on tour during the suffrage period,[63] but Australian publications engaged in all manner of theatrical debate. News of British developments was fast to reach Australian shores. One 1909 *Lone Hand* article, for example, surveys the development of repertory theatres in England, and pays particular attention to Miss Horniman's 'experimental' Gaiety Theatre in Manchester. Certain suffrage plays are also reviewed in the article, with the Play Actors' production of Miss Baker's *Chains* described as being 'one of the freshest and most promising of English

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[62] Ann Larabee, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[63] For an informative general history of this period, see for example Katharine Brisbane (ed), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History*, Sydney, 1991.

plays for some time past'.[64] Reference is also made to the theatrical scene in Chicago, where 'an art theatre has already been in operation for some time and has produced a wonderful variety of plays of the first order'.[65]

While Australians theatre workers and audiences were interested in what was happening abroad, they were primarily concerned with what was happening, or not happening, in Australian. There was some consternation about the supposed lack of development of Australian drama earlier this century, and theatre histories of today still decry the dearth of traditions in Australian playwrighting.[66] The most damaging idea informing Australian theatre history, and resisting the recovery of early feminist dramatic traditions, is the concept that the history of Australian drama before 1955 is one of aspiration rather than achievement. Peter Fitzpatrick talks of 'rhythms of excited promise and disillusionment, of births, renaissances and deaths'[67] as being recurrent themes in the development of a national drama. Superficially, such evaluation can be regarded as being correct. Between the establishment of the Pioneer Players in 1920 (which marks the first attempts at a national rather than an imported drama), and the 1955 production of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (which marks the first national and international success of an Australian play), nothing much of lasting dramatic significance is believed to have happened.

Indeed, the reluctance of theatre managements during the suffrage period to underwrite experimentation by departing from proven classics, and governments to accept a major responsibility for the funding of initiatives in theatre, helped to ensure that even popular successes of the period were remarkable more for their singularity of achievement against the odds than for contributing to the development of a truly Australian drama. In the late 1960s, a period which some Australian theatre historians have referred to as a 'revolution', a new drama developed; one which was hailed as being a 'conscious revolt against the conventions and expectations bred into the Australian theatre by generations of

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[64] Leon Brodzky, 'Repertory and Experimental Theatres', *Lone Hand*, September 1909, p. 586.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 584.
[66] The journal *Lone Hand* was perhaps most vocal on this subject in the historical context.
[67] Peter Fitzpatrick, *After The Doll*, Melbourne, 1979, p. 2.

imported plays'. These playwrights were considered to be part of a generation determined to change the course of cultural imperialism in Australia: 'No more English Lords, Ladies, debutantes, or Antipodean versions of the same. No more American corncob musicals bursting with sugar and sentiment, either. In short, no more being colonised'.[68] This protest against colonisation had in fact begun long ago. Australian feminist playwrights had long been questioning the right and might of empire, from its commands to war and allegiance, its superiority in language and culture, and its supposed leadership. These sentiments are reflected in the suffrage plays explored in this thesis.

How then did Australian suffrage theatre develop? It was of course influenced by overseas developments in women's theatre, but not overwhelmed by that influence. Theatre historian Richard Waterhouse disparages the tradition in Australian historiography which 'assumes that imported culture is by definition a culture of imposition, a means by which the British, and later, the Americans have established hegemony over our culture and society'.[69] Although he argues solidly the case for cultural osmosis rather than cultural imperialism, Australia's cultural growth has been subjected to more traditional interpretation. That traditional view sees Australia's cultural emergence as a story of progress with clear stages of development which proceed from 'colonial dependence to national assertiveness, finally to arrive at some vicissitudes at the "relative abundance" and "maturity" of the years since 1950'.[70] The Australian womanhood suffrage movement was one of the earliest challenges to colonial dependence on England.

Theatre, with its dependence on performance and audience, is an art that is deeply rooted in the structure of a society's image of itself. Nineteenth century Australian theatre audiences consisted of mixed classes, more so than Britain or America.[71] This is due partly to the comparatively late emergence of a middle class in the 1840s. After this, theatre became less divergent and increasingly specialised, but it was not until the early twentieth century that we see a movement towards cultural division and the establishment of 'high'

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[68] Leonard Radic, *The State of Play*, Melbourne, 1991, p. 5.
[69] Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788-1914*, Sydney, 1990, p. xii.
[70] David Walker, *Dream and Disillusion: A Search For Australian Cultural Identity*, Canberra, 1976, p. 207.
[71] Richard Waterhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

culture. Still, the relationship between high and popular culture remained closer in Australia because of the 'absence of a large, wealthy and educated elite to carry the banner of Kultur'.[72]

In 1892, the London *Dramatic Year Book* paid tribute to Australian drama, claiming that 'there is perhaps no country in the world where the drama has made such rapid strides and attained such a high standard in so short a period as in Australasia'.[73] Colonial theatre was not regarded as high culture by nineteenth century Australians but simply as thrilling entertainment. That entertainment was mainly derived from popular melodramas of the day. It is this dramatic form that witnessed the beginnings of a national drama. As Leslie Rees has noted,[74] melodramas with Australian rather than English settings drew on real-life sources for their material, including convictism, bushranging, and goldfever. The public appreciated the drawing of local scenes, but drama with an Australian flavour had many critics.[75]

During the 1890s, the growth of a vocal nationalism, the rise of militant unionism, and socialist idealism calling for an egalitarian Australian utopia dominated the decade. Much Australian drama and literature was busy creating nationalist stereotypes and cultural myths. The bushman, 'pitting his strength against the land, became an archetypal figure who embodied the mateship and integrity and the radical antipathy to bourgeois conformity'.[76] The 1890s and the early years of the new century saw an upsurge of a distinctively Australian spirit. There was the *Bulletin* school of writers, and the Australian landscape school of painters, but it is argued there was 'no worthy dramatic counterpart'.[77] Suffrage theatre history reveals how misplaced such assertions are. Recently, feminist historians have contested the mythology of the 1890s which so preoccupies Australian history and has been so exclusive of women's traditions.[78] This history of Australian

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[72] *Ibid.*

[73] Quoted in H G Kippax, 'Introduction', *Three Australian Plays*, Melbourne, 1980 , p 7.

[74] Leslie Rees, *Making of Australian Drama*, Sydney, 1973, p. 49.

[75] See for example the critical appraisal of Australian melodrama, quoted from the *Bulletin*, 3 January 1891, in V Kirby-Smith, 'The Development of Australian Theatre and Drama', Duke University PhD, 1969, p. 85.

[76] Margaret Williams, *Drama,* Melbourne, 1977, p. 10.

[77] Leslie Rees, *op cit.*, p. 104.

[78] This is most effectively argued in Susan Magarey (et al), *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Sydney, 1993. Despite the inclusion of other cultural evidence which contributes to this

suffrage theatre is meant to be more than an exercise in recovery, but nevertheless significantly contributes to such feminist contestation of Australian history.

Towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, many were questioning the absence of a national drama. The publication *Lone Hand*, established in 1907, championed this cause. *Lone Hand* questioned the whereabouts of a drama which could show 'the social forces at work among people, the characteristic types of men and women, their morals and manners, and all else that makes them Australian and not English people'.[79] As the following chapters demonstrate, Australian drama of this type was being written and produced. Such historical commentary reveals that women's theatre—performed as it usually was in fringe venues and dealing with 'woman's' themes—was considered by the very 'male' publishing industry in Australia (represented here by the *Lone Hand*) to be of little or no consequence.

These publications, however neglectful they were of acknowledging actual developments in Australian theatre rather than simply complaining about its paucity, played an important role in monitoring mainstream theatre. A major cause of the 'late' development of an Australian drama has been credited to the power of the commercial theatre organisations which were founded in the nineteenth century; organisations that came under much scrutiny.[80] These organisations developed as a major concern during the gold rushes, a time which saw the doubling of Australia's population. The firm of J C Williamson is perhaps the best known culprit of the era. That such commercial managements were responsible for the large number of theatres in Australian capital cities is beyond doubt. However, they were also said to be uncompromising and unenterprising. They were also accused of never giving local artists a chance and monopolising Australia's theatrical development.[81]

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contestation, women's theatre is given no consideration, and could have made significant contribution to this subject.

[79] *Ibid.*

[80] See for example Dennis Carroll, *Australian Contemporary Drama 1909-1982-A Critical Introduction*, New York, 1985.

[81] See for example V Tait, *A Family of Brothers-The Taits and J C Williamson, A Theatre History*, Melbourne, 1971.

What role did these enterprising commercial managements really play in the development of culture in Australia? Australians certainly enjoyed a long unbroken period of the best entertainment the world had to offer.[82] There were nevertheless disadvantages to the shrewd commercial management. For example, when Ibsen's *A Doll House* was performed in Melbourne in 1889, its plot caused confusion amongst both audiences and critics. To make the play more 'palatable to local consumers',[83] Williamson even suggested adding a happy ending, which is how melodrama would logically resolve the situation. Williamson's idea of what Australia audiences wanted was locked into his own idea of what 'good' theatre was, and this decision was always influenced by commercial interests.

More than 650 plays were written and produced in Australia by 1900. Only 176 of those had Australian subjects, settings and characters.[84] During the first two decades of the twentieth century, there appeared to be a genuine and increasing interest in Australian plays. Growth in population was partly responsible, as was sentiment surrounding Federation: 'Australians were not yet thinking as a nation, but they were beginning to think as Australians'.[85] Despite the well documented fact that theatre managements in Australian too often overlooked local playwrights in favour of overseas talent, Australian playwrights continued to write. Before the Pioneer Players, 'the first organisation in Australia in which the sole objective was the production of local plays with literary as well as dramatic quality' occurred in Melbourne in 1909.[86] This first Australian Drama Night, as it was called, included *The Burglar* by Katharine Susannah Prichard, and *If Youth But Knew* by Kathleen Watson. In 1911 Gregan McMahon, founder of the Melbourne Repertory Theatre, produced several Australian dramas including *Whither?* by Mary Wilkinson. Around the end of the first world war, Mrs E Coulson Davidson attempted to establish an Australian theatre to produce dramas based on Aboriginal legends.[87] In Sydney in 1918 a second repertory society founded by Gregan McMahon produced

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[82] *Ibid.*, p. xi.
[83] Richard Waterhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
[84] Eric Irvin, *Dictionary of the Australian Theatre 1788-1914*, Sydney, 1985, pp. 36-37.
[85] *Ibid*
[86] W Moore & T I Moore (eds), 'The Development of Australian Drama' in *Best Australian One-Act Plays*, Sydney, 1937, p. xx.
[87] *Ibid.*

Margeurite Dale's play *Secondary Considerations*. As early as 1908, the Adelaide Repertory Theatre was established, the founders devoted to developing Australian drama and particularly South Australian writers, including Phyllis Somerville, Marie Symons, and Wilfred Neill. Despite persisting beliefs that Australian drama did not come of age until the 1960s, even in the 1930s it was possible to assert that: 'There has been such a limited market for dramatists that one is surprised at their comparatively large output'.[88]

It would be impossible here to provide anything more than a cursory overview of Australian theatre at this time, but this overview has been necessary as a foundation for insights offered in the following chapters. Australian theatre history is at present a growing area of scholarship. There are some interesting histories covering this period already available, although they make no mention of suffrage theatre in particular. Richard Fotheringham's *Sport in Australian Drama*, however, cites the Australian stage as a particular area of achievement for women during this period:

> ...a number of Australian actresses and singers had achieved success in London, whereas few expatriate Australian male actors had gained more than minor roles on the English stage. This made the stage a place associated with international female achievement, just as the sporting field was associated with male Australian nationalism.[89]

The stage as a special site of female achievement does not belong to actresses alone, but was also the domain of the Australian suffrage playwright.

In a 1907 article in an Australian journal entitled 'Feminism and Theatre', a male critic commented that: 'Woman is confidently expected to exert an ennobling and refining influence in politics' since she had received the vote. He wondered: 'Can we look with confidence for a new excellence in the drama when woman's tastes and inclinations have fully asserted themselves?'[90] The exploration of Australian suffrage theatre conducted in the following chapters offers a belated answer to this question. That answer begins from the premise of this survey which argues for the unique circumstances of both Australian suffrage and theatre history. Australian suffragette theatre is characterised by its

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[88] *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.
[89] Richard Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama*, Melbourne, 1992, p. 58.
[90] Stargazer, 'Feminism and Theatre', *Lone Hand*, August 1907.

internationalism, its advanced expressions of 'post-suffrage' feminisms, and its expatriatism which reveals a desire to both heal and be healed by the larger world.

The first part of this chapter has argued for the inclusion of the Australian experience in suffrage theatre history. That inclusion would necessitate a redefinition of suffrage drama as a genre, and calls for a reassessment of periodisation terms common to suffrage historiography. Before moving on to study specific examples of Australian suffrage theatre, another process of exclusion needs to be confronted before critical and theoretical evaluations can be conducted. Stowell emphasises that one of the greatest achievements of suffrage drama—aside from its political effects and the professional opportunities created for women—was its contribution to the development of feminist traditions in women's theatre. Suffrage dramatists made significant contributions to feminist dramaturgy, as Stowell points out:

> ...the selection and handling of particular themes and characters was as responsive (and reactive) to theatrical genre as it was to political ideology... [suffrage plays] may be read as women's challenges to conventions both social and aesthetic.[91]

Those aesthetic challenges saw the exploitation of dramatic structures to feminist ends. Despite this, the theoretical concerns of feminist dramatic criticism itself questions whether or not suffrage drama can seriously be considered as feminist theatre. The final section of this chapter is devoted to that debate.

FEMINIST THEORY & SUFFRAGE THEATRE HISTORY

Understanding when, why and how women achieved the vote is a growing professional enterprise. Once the domain of historians, this area is of increasing interest to a variety of disciplines, from political science to theatre studies. There is a wealth of knowledge available—and developments in feminist theatre studies mirror that wealth, offering theatre historians useful critical tools with which to approach their subject: but are they useful enough? This section is devoted to answering that question; one prompted by what began

[91] Sheila Stowell, *op. cit.* p.153.

as an uneasy disquiet which grew into a profitable suspicion about the discourse surrounding the topic of realism's 'failures' as a suitable dramatic form for feminist theatre practitioners. What resulted is the idea that the righteousness of those critical arguments evaporates when applied to certain historical situations, and the notion that better critical tools are needed to evaluate women's theatre history.

Brains without a play? Suffrage dramaturgy

To begin the defence, suffrage theatre's contribution to the development of feminist dramaturgy needs to be taken into account. Dale Spender notes that in general, criticism of women's theatre of this period concludes that it was not 'good' theatre. She questions that subjective measurement and argues that suffrage plays were: 'an expression of the policy of bad behaviour...with their mockery their elements of farce, and their blatant disrespect for men', and thus constitute an exciting part of women's political theatre history.[92] Those 'policies of bad behaviour' extended beyond thematic treatments to strike at dramatic form, and resulted in a series of theatrical interventions which resulted in the development of suffrage dramaturgy. Suffrage drama was always more than 'brains without a play', as one male critic described it in 1907.[93]

Throughout this study, specific examples offered will question the suitability of realism for feminist theatre practitioners, and show how suffrage playwrights worked within, around and beyond the genre. These examples ultimately support Stowell's argument that suffrage drama was often written in response to what women playwrights called male-determined or male-imitative playmaking, and because of this their endeavours can be regarded as a conscious attempt to construct an 'authentic' woman's drama. Audiences were asked to think about not only the feminist content of the plays, but 'about the very aesthetic structures to which they had grown habituated'.[94] That is, dramatic form was influenced by the thematic content of suffrage drama.

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[92] Dale Spender & Carole Hayman (eds), *'How the Vote Was Won' and Other Suffragette Plays*, London, 1985, p. 13.

[93] Review of Elizabeth Robins' *Votes For Women*, cut from the *Daily Chronicle*, 10 April 1907, Maude Arncliffe-Sennett papers, vol 1, p. 63, (British Library). The critic said of the play that it was 'not a play without brains. I should rather describe it as brains without a play'.

[94] Sheila Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Stowell insinuates that a revision of thematic topics and dramatic characters inevitably leads to a distinctly feminist dramaturgy: 'a rehandling of a subject like marriage, for example, merges imperceptibly into a re-examination of the assumption supporting traditional comic endings'.[95] Suffrage playwrights, then, are characterised by their 'renegotiations' of existing dramatic genres, or as Stowell says, by 'a grab-bag of conventions recycled for feminist ends'.[96] Suffrage plays, with their lengthy excursions into feminist dramaturgy, did far more than recycle theatre fashions, they helped build the catwalk that developed into the parade ground for later developments that fashioned twentieth century feminist theatre. That certain aspects of feminist dramatic criticism cast aspersions on these dramaturgical developments by questioning if suffrage theatre was in fact feminist theatre, only intensifies feminist theatre historians' need to more actively engage with theoretical issues.

Theory, feminism & dramatic form: the case against realism

The major theoretical contributions to this debate have come from Jill Dolan and Sue-Ellen Case. Dolan summarises the case against realism thus:

> Realism is prescriptive in that it reifies the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes....The crisis that propels the realist plot is resolved when the elements that create textual disturbances are reinstated within a culturally defined system of order at the narrative's end.[97]

Reification of 'traditional power relations'—that is, patriarchal ones which oppress women, is not congruent with feminist agendas. Therefore to employ realism, argued to be a patriarchal dramatic form which contributes to and endorses this oppression, is to betray any quest for feminist agency. How? If Dolan's assessment of realism as a conservative force which precludes interrogation of orthodox society by offering audiences a 'seamless illusion' is correct, then realism only serves to endorse bourgeois hegemony, and thus proves counterproductive to feminist goals.

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[95] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[97] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Ann Arbor, 1988, p. 84.

Elin Diamond supports these ideas, and explores how realism worked to subordinate women: 'Dramatic realism produces precisely those conditions that allow for the creation of a smugly self-identifying spectator/critic and the creation in the late nineteenth century of an aggressively bourgeois we'.[98] That is, as Diamond suggests, audiences believed that what they were seeing on the stage was real. This is read as dangerous because 'realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces "reality" by positioning its spectators to recognise and verify its truths'.[99] Diamond reads those truths as being supportive of historical patriarchal structures. On one level this is a most convincing argument; but what happens when the same operations of 'we' and realism work in favour of advancing feminist agendas as is the case with AFL playwrights? Is this a case of justifiable 'recycling' as Stowell argues, or as other critics conclude, an act of betrayal? There is no room in the alluring arguments against realism for recognising the achievements of Edwardian feminist playwrights, and there is little value in such theorising for the feminist theatre historian unless she wants to play hangman.

Recognising this, Diamond attempts to construct a new theoretical space. She considers the women spectators of Ibsen in 1891 London as historical subjects, and how realism may have empowered them. The suggestion is made that these women, in spectating, may have 'validated their antipatriarchal tendencies'. If so, the dangerous universal 'we' of spectatorship moves into a distinctly feminist space; one in which the spectator's identification process under realism becomes political, and more transforming than circumscribing for women. Diamond argues that in such circumstances the social status quo is not being reinforced, but rather that 'temporary' new spaces are being created. She concludes that even though 'It seems ridiculous from our vantage point to see realism in the service of revolution' that suffrage women spectators 'entering into and inhabiting powerful roles, are conceivably capable of transformation'.[100]

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[98] Elin Diamond, 'The Violence of "We": Politicising Identification', Reinelt & Roach, (eds), *Critical Theory and Performance*, 1992, p. 393.
[99] *Ibid.*
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 397.

What Diamond is really theorising here is a politics of identification, one that reads identity as unstable and contingent. To recognise the identities of Edwardian women and suffrage playwrights requires an understanding of that instability, and also of their ability to inhabit self-created feminist spaces as audience members and theatre practitioners. For these reasons, as Diamond's thoughts on Ibsen's matinee women reveals, a new dialogue needs to develop between the feminist dramatic theorists (against realism), and feminist theatre historians, who are by no means simply devoted to what Jacky Bratton has called 'the joyful uncovering of those "hidden from history", the straightforward reclamation of "our story" that impelled the first wave of feminist criticism and history'. Like Bratton, I am 'seeking to understand...more complicated matters',[101] and though suspicious of realism, it is necessary to recognise, as Diamond does, that 'Only by attending to the projections, the...self transforming fantasies of historical subjects'[102] can the necessary leaps be taken to better perceive suffrage theatre history.

I wholly agree that the use of theatrical form is implicitly political, either reinforcing the status quo or challenging it. But to wholeheartedly accept the belief that realism is a 'prisonhouse of art' for women, as Case argues, requires too great a leap for the feminist theatre historian.[103] To agree uncritically that realism is a theatrical language which did, and continues to, dominate theatre and marginalise women is risky, especially in historical contexts. Further, to believe that when women practitioners appropriate this theatrical vehicle to share their own experiences through drama 'they are following precedents established by male-dominated theatre' which have been historically exclusive to women, is a troublesome assertion. [104] The problem with this theoretical supposition is located in the 'presentist' bias of feminist theatre theory: 'is' dangerous; 'is' exclusive; 'is' not feminist theatre practice. 'Was' is the more proper question for feminist theatre historians: was realism, for feminist suffrage theatre practitioners, what modern criticism claims it 'is'?

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[101] Jacky Bratton, 'Working in the Margin: Women in Theatre History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol 10, no 38, May 1994, p. 125.
[102] Diamond, *op. cit.*, p. 397.
[103] Sue-Ellen Case, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
[104] Peta Tait, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Sydney, 1994, p. 28.

Arguments against realism, particularly in the context of contemporary theatre, can be barely faulted. For feminist theatre practitioners today, the convincing enthusiasm of this critical rhetoric must surely be inspirational in the quest for new theatrical territories. The limitations of these critical arguments, however, soon become apparent when applied in a historical context. Stowell's work on suffrage theatre history and its defence of realism offers a rare example of a feminist theatre historian directly confronting feminist theatre theory. Diamond's work failed to properly transpose those theories, as the above example suggests. Regardless, even Stowell's defence of realism and her engagement in this debate offered no serious consideration of the failures of feminist dramatic criticism's ability to travel back in time with meaningful results. For the feminist theatre historian, that failure and the seeking of possible solutions is mandatory.

That this so-called failure should only now manifest itself is not surprising considering the comparatively late entry and marginalisation of theatre studies in the academy; theatre history's marginalised position within theatre studies; and the relatively recent emergence of feminist dramatic criticism compared to feminist literary and film theory.[105] Critical reflections take time to develop, and it is only recently that feminist theatre history and criticism have begun to ask hard questions of each other. The agendas, philosophies and language of one does not necessarily suit the other. Perhaps indigenous terms of reference need to be developed by feminist theatre historians. That language could in turn inform feminist dramatic criticism, just as feminist theatre historiography has been informed by theoretical rhetoric.

This hope for continued critical exchange and growth within feminist studies is why I take particular exception to the limitations that the anti-realism debate imposes on the historical conduct of feminist theatre practitioners of the suffrage era. Without due recognition of the feminist negotiations conducted through and within realism in historical circumstances, the presentist gaze of modern criticism neglectfully condemns those achievements. What questions, then, should a feminist theatre historian ask—especially

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[105] These issues have been noted, explained and debated by various commentators. See for example Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*, Ann Arbor, 1990, on the the development of feminist dramatic criticism. For the status of theatre studies, see for example Dolan, 'Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the "Performative" ', *Theatre Journal*, 45, 1993, pp. 417-441.

one who is convinced of the theoretical merits of the debate against realism yet experiences its practical frustrations? In the context of this study of suffrage theatre, there are two guiding questions: did suffrage theatre practitioners feel confined by the limitations of realism? Further, was the decision to embrace realism a conscious one, one which intelligently rejected other alternatives?

Realism working for feminism: the case for recognising difference

The winning rationale for me in this debate is put forward by Stowell: 'while dramatic and theatrical styles may be developed or adopted to naturalise or challenge certain positions, dramatic forms are not in themselves narrowly partisan. They may be inhabited from within by a variety of ideologies'.[106] Further, just as realism can be critiqued from a feminist position, so too can the embracement of forms of theatre which favour the emblematic over realistic presentation be questioned. As Stowell and other critics have pointed out, historically such forms have been used to endorse patriarchal authority as represented in the Church and the State, particularly in Medieval times.[107]

Edwardian feminists may well have entertained these same ideas about theatre history themselves. Speculation aside, suffrage theatre practitioners—in particular actresses—have left ample records documenting their enthusiastic welcome and embracement of male realist playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw. Modern criticism of the feminist limitations of those 'advancements' have been similarly passionate,[108] but what matters is not what today's feminist playwright may think of Ibsen, but what her Edwardian predecessor thought about such role models.

What feminist value, then, did realism have for suffrage theatre practitioners? As Elaine Aston points out, 'The narrative strategies of 'realism' and its bourgeois ideologies have been critiqued by both feminist theatre scholars and practitioners.'[109] However in the case of most suffrage plays, it is through the character driven narrative—that reviled

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[106] Sheila Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
[107] See *ibid.*
[108] See for example Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981, and Viv Gardner & Susan Rutherford (eds), *op. cit.*, for examples of both historical responses to this, and recent feminist interventions.
[109] Elaine Aston, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

convention of realism—that the feminism of the suffrage movement was seen, heard and read, then and today. While Tait convincingly argues that 'feminist inquiry [should] look to the potential of theatre forms other than realism to disrupt belief in a male defined, pervasive reality',[110] suffrage playwrights were busy exploiting the new female subjectivities that realism allowed them.

Aston cites the work of cultural-materialist Catherine Belsey in her consideration of feminist theories of representation. Belsey is concerned with subjectivity, and classifies literary texts in her study as either 'classic realist', or 'interrogative'. Her observations, summarised here by Aston, offer valuable analytic tools for assessing suffrage drama:

> Those literary texts which belong to Besley's definition of 'classic realism' are symbolic: offer a stable subject positioning, fix meaning, move towards closure...seek to...anaesthetise the desire for the Imaginary. Those which are defined as 'interrogative demonstrate an 'unfixing' of the subject, a destabilising of meaning. and acknowledge the painful suturing of the Imaginary and the Symbolic...[111]

Important in this argument is Besley's observation, as Aston points out, that 'the interrogative text...appears "at times of crisis in the social formation" and is indicative of a desire for change'.[112] These observations on the operation of subjectivity within realism seem to suggest that the form itself has ample room for interrogative or subversive actions against any society which attempts to and/or successfully defines women's subjectivity. According to Besley's model, suffrage drama with its feminist interrogation of female subjectivity and its expressed desire for change seriously challenges the 'deadly consequences' attributed to realism by certain critics.[113]

Aston's concludes that: 'As feminism rejects the formal and ideological apparatus which denies the female spectator a subject position, the case against realism is clear'.[114] Perhaps this conclusion is meaningful only in the enlightened context of the 1990s. Women almost a century ago—women whose chains were made of different stuff and

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[110] Peat Tait, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
[111] Elaine Aston, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[113] Sue-Ellen Case quoted in Elaine Aston, *il id.*, p. 41.
[114] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

whose struggles were theirs alone to fight--were probably more likely to agree with Emma Goldman. She praised the Modern Drama for its important significance to women, claiming it as: '...the dynamite which undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women for the reconstruction'.[115]

Beyond critical divisions and into the unreal

My argument for realism, if you like, or for the rethinking of the current critical applications of feminist theory on the nature of realism, will be taken up with specific examples throughout this study. Peggy Phelan's work on representation and the 'real' explores how the 'real' is maintained, and how it is disabled. She defines 'real' within the context of the history of theatre as 'what theatre defines itself against, even while reduplicating its effects'.[116] In this pursuit of the real, to represent it, there are risks involved, because as Phelan points out, 'This relationship between self and other is a marked one, which is to say it is unequal'.[117] Therefore in the desire of suffrage playwrights to populate the stage with their feminist role models—with 'real' women—it was inevitable that they would be 'marked', simply by their hope and desire to reproduce themselves, and for their audiences to meet them. They have been doubly marked by feminist criticism which condemns them for their 'bad' dramatic behaviour which is thought to betray feminist dramaturgy.

Phelan says that 'The combination of psychic hope and political-historical inequality makes the contemporary encounter between self and other a meeting of profound romance and deep violence'.[118] For the suffrage playwrights of this study, the writing of themselves as 'real others' in their dramatic characters involved that same trauma, because once their characters became 'real' and seen, representation was out of their control. It was and is marked by others, including me, reading their work today. Phelan argues that 'Performance's only life is the present'.[119] Despite this, theatre critics and

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[115] Emma Goldman, 'The Social Significance of the Modern Drama', Malpede (ed), *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope*, New York, 1983, p. 71.
[116] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York, 1993, p. 3.
[117] *Ibid.*
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[119] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

theatre historians attempt to save it, record it, document it, and thereby involve themselves in 'the circulation of representations *of* representations' an enterprise fraught with danger.[120] Phelan offers advice of particular use for feminist historians 'concerned with understanding the relation between the real and the representational', arguing that we must 'recognise that our failing eyes may be insufficient organs for measuring the terms and meanings of the transformative alchemy between them'.[121] This suggests that critical observations must be trusted for what they are—inherently flawed, but insights nevertheless—and therefore the quest to 'see' must continue regardless. This attempt to 'see' Australian suffrage theatre makes a similar plea, asking that the guided journey be trusted, if not its conclusions.

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[120] *Ibid.*
[121] *Ibid.*, p. 180.