Section B

INEZ ISABEL BENSUSAN

A Case Study

INTRODUCING INEZ BENSUSAN

Another Attempt

The basic achievements of Inez Isabel Bensusan's theatrical life are easily paraphrased, the allure of Bensusan as historical subject increasing with each retelling. Bensusan's first introduction to late twentieth century voyeurs came via Julie Holledge's seminal study on women and Edwardian theatre, *Innocent Flowers*.[1] Most critical attention, then and since, has focused critical attention solely on the 'products' of Bensusan's professional enterprises, and not on the means of production. Her acclaimed play, *The Apple*, has been subject to various feminist dramatic criticisms, as have the achievements of the Actresses' Franchise League's (AFL) Play Department under Bensusan's direction. Until now, Bensusan as a biographical subject has received no critical attention. For a woman recognised as having made a 'significant contribution...to women's theatre',[2] Bensusan remains an enigmatic figure in theatre history. The following chapters introduce Bensusan as an Australian Jewish woman expatriate, a feminist, and a highly politicised theatre professional; thereby locating her in a very different historical space than that which she currently enjoys. This examination of her life and work is offered here as a case study illustrating the character of Australian suffrage theatre as outlined in earlier chapters. Bensusan's theatrical career clearly represents those defining qualities: embracing 'post-suffrage' attitudes, enacting expatriate feminist desire, and absorbing the influences of trends and developments in international women's theatre of the period.

'Historical space' is a fundamental factor in this exploration of Australian suffragette playwrights. The first section of this thesis examined some ways in which international feminist theatre influenced Australian theatre, explored how Australian women controlled theatrical spaces at home, and questioned why and how that wealth of

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[1] Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981.

[2] Dale Spender, *How The Vote Was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, London, 1985, p. 141.

Figure 5.1 *Publicity shot of Inez Isabel Bensusan, c 1900 (MM).*

theatrical experience travelled with cert ain expatriate suffrage playwrights. Moving from an evaluation of theatrical experiments, bo h failed and famed, to an inquiry of consolidation and success, the second half of this the sis is devoted to Bensusan.

Bensusan as an Australian suffragette theatre practitioner whose expatriate influence on the development of British feminist theatre has not been fully realised, offers an opportunity to explore how historical spaces are built, occupied, and bordered. Feminist dramatic criticism has only recently rei ntroduced Bensusan, and swiftly and neatly placed her within the clearly defined space of British suffrage theatre history.[3] That inclusion tells its own story of exclusion, one that does not recognise the individual character of Bensusan's feminism, or acknowledge its colonial construction—let alone how that heritage influenced her theatrical career. The very fact that Bensusan met with the kind of success which she did not only insists that these achievements be critically examined in a major study, but that they be examined in a feminist context that questions the Anglo/American hegemony which cha acterises much theatre history (including feminist histories) of this period.

The expatriate tradition and international feminism

Jill Roe and other feminist Australian scholars have paid close attention to interplay of nationalism and internationalism in the history of Australian women. The tradition of feminist expatriatism witnessed the displacement of talented, ambitious, and enfranchised women into comparatively politically backward foreign environments. So why did they leave? Roe comments that:

> In colonies of recent settlement such as Australia, the nationalist dream of self-determination has offered women a place—sometimes. At other times the alternative of internationalism has seemed more promising...Australian women have oscillated between nationalist and internationalist strategies in an

[3] Holledge notes in passing that Bensusan was 'Australian born': *op. cit.*, p. 62. It was this information which inspired this thesis, leading me to ask questions that Holledge and others have not, for example: how Australian was Bensusan; what was her reputation as an enfranchised woman; was she the only Australian woman working in London's feminist theatre; and what would her opportunities have been had she stayed at home?

> ongoing struggle for enhanced status...There has been a strong formal preference for international sm over nationalism in modern feminism.[4]

When Bensusan exercised her preference for a different space and became an expatriate, to meet the promise of enhanced status in a new world she took with her the gifts of the old. Those gifts played a significant role in the development of early twentieth century feminist theatre.

Australian writer Peter Carey's most recent novel deals with similar issues of identity and displacement, and the wealths and poverties which characterise the Australian expatriate experience. Carey's character Felicity, having recently made the decision to abandon her national theatre in Efica (mythical Australia), declares 'No one can ever tell me what an Efican national identity might be. We're northern hemisphere people, who have been abandoned in the south. All we know is what we are not'.[5] Part of the expatriate desire for white colonial Australian women such as Bensusan recognised that absence of identity and sought to rectify it by confronting the 'what' of what they were 'not'. That desire enacted, Bensusan arrived in England as a white Jewish feminist woman full of colonial complexities. Her feminism in action—her life and work—can not be fully appreciated without recognising that Bensusan's internationalism was formulated in the crucible of Australian nationalism, as she experienced it in late nineteenth century Sydney.

The contours of this exploration

Documenting the historical unwrapping of Bensusan's life and work, this study moves on from the last expatriate chapter of Section A and returns to Australia to begin with a biographical outline of her early life. Problems associated with locating Bensusan due to the availability of historical records are discussed but, despite the difficulties with evidence and sources, an interesting story of her early life in a large Jewish family in colonial Sydney emerges. Bensusan began her performing career in Australia and this experience also informed her feminism and her expatriate desires.

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[4] Jill Roe, 'What has Nationalism Offered Australian Women' in Grieve, Norma & Burns, Alison (eds) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, Melbourne, 1994, p. 30

[5] Peter Carey, *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, St Lucia, 1994, p. 117.

The second chapter, an examination of her professional career in the theatre, argues that Bensusan was supremely and uniquely placed to enjoy her later success as a playwright. Her work as an actress, producer, and director, examined here, provided a thorough knowledge of the theatre industry, knowledge she well exercised in her work as an administrator and executive member of AFL and other organisations. Bensusan's most important work for the AFL, as head of the Play Department, is considered in a new light, arguing that her artistic directorship was of immense tactical support to the wider suffrage movement. Bensusan's establishment of the Woman's Theatre is also given fresh consideration, the argument being that its achievements have been discounted by feminist historians. To conclude the chapter, Bensusan's work during and after the war in the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company is presented for the first time.

Following this, Bensusan's work as a playwright comes under critical scrutiny. The scripts of two plays written during this period survive, the popular *The Apple*, and *Nobody's Sweetheart*, which has not been discussed before. Close attention is paid to the relationship between the authorial voice as expressed in the texts, and the audience of the day. As John Rouse says, 'The relationship between text and performance is...a question of both the possible and the allowable'.[6] How 'allowable' is it to second-guess the 'possible' interpretations of these plays both to suffrage and contemporary audiences? That question guides this textual interpretation. In this inherently flawed historical exercise, the texts emerge as being simultaneously more and less than appear in the readings offered here.

Bensusan's plays 'speak'. The texts in performance 'show'. Show what? To whom? Who has the right to answer those questions, and how should the answers be attempted? These are problems of particular concern to feminist theatre historians when dealing with any historical theatre text. Bensusan's plays were mobilised when she wrote them, when they were performed, and are mobilised again by critical interpretations today which constantly shift the meanings of the texts. This mobility characterises the particular problematics of performance history, but at some point these problems must be confronted

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[6] John Rouse, 'Textuality and Authority in Theatre and Drama: Some Contemporary Possibilities', in Reinelt & Roach (eds), *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ann Arbor, 1992, p. 146.

and an attempt to locate meaning must be made. The results of that attempt are offered tentatively here, with the acknowledgement that 'to allow any meaning to settle becomes a lie, in fact even a counter-revolutionary one'.[7]

Accepting that risk, this reading of Bensusan's plays seeks out her revolutionary voice, and charts reactions to it. As cultural constellations change, so too does the reception of that voice. The dialogue generated between one of Bensusan's plays and an audience today would be vastly different from one created through the original productions, but all historical dialogue requires a point of entry from an acknowledged present. To achieve an understanding of how meanings and psychic relationships were created through theatre during the suffrage period, and in order to contemplate the revolutionary potential of suffrage theatre, Bensusan's voice must somehow be sought. What follows in one such attempt.

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[7] Janelle Reinelt paraphrasing McDonald, 'Introduction: Semiotics and Deconstruction', *ibid.*, p. 114.

A NICE COLONIAL GIRL?

Bensusan's Early Years

Australia had not even celebrated its first centenary when Inez Isabel Bensusan was born in Sydney in 1871. At this time the Australian colonies had a population of over one million people and forty million sheep. Aboriginal displacement and—in certain instances—genocide followed the arrival of the first fleet in 1788. This was the beginning of white Australia history which, before Bensusan's birth, included convict life, the Rum Corps, emancipists, sheep sagas, pastoral ascendancy and the squattocracy, gold rushes and massive migration, rebellion and bushrangers, as well as auspicious beginnings to the entertainment industry. There followed in the first decades of Bensusan's life, the growth of socialism and the union movement, the stormy 1890s, nationalism and Federation, and the vote for women.

LIFE IN COLONIAL SYDNEY

Bensusan grew up surrounded by these commercial and intellectual developments. By the 1880s the colonies were well engaged in the transition to becoming an industrial capitalist society, with the pastoral industries being of supreme importance. For women, domestic service was the biggest employer. Factory work was preferred for its perceived better pay and conditions, although in reality factories involved long hours, unhealthy conditions, and the exploitation of child labour. When Bensusan was a teenager, Sydney factory girls earned as little as five shillings a week, while men were earning an average two pounds.[1]

Class status was reinforced in Sydney, as elsewhere in the colonies, by economic roles. For certain Sydney women there were increasingly, other options available than factory work. Carol Chambers Garner argues, for example, that educated and white-collar women workers of this period offered alternative role-models for colonial girls.[2] The

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[1] See Ray Markey, 'Women and Labour, 1880-1900' in Windschuttle (ed), *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978*, Melbourne, 1980, p.89.

[2] Carol Chambers Garner, 'Educated and White Collar Women in the 1880s', in Windschuttle, *ibid.*

'Woman Question' was popularly debated throughout the colonies, with increasing focus on feminist goals, aided by the Temperance movement. These debates were mostly conducted through newspapers and journals, with publications such as Louisa Lawson's *The Dawn* proving to be invaluable for feminist education and networking.[3] By the beginning of the 1880s, the value of what traditionally passed as a girls' school curriculum was being challenged, and by the mid-1880s Australian universities had already produced their first women graduates. Teaching, journalism, photography, typing, stenography, and other white collar professions were opening up for women.

These waves of change were not unique to Sydney, nor indeed Australia, but Bensusan nevertheless experienced unique exposures to political, social, and cultural life as a colonial Sydneysider. Historian Miriam Dixson argues that, for the most part, Australia lacked a strong and confident intelligentsia. She quotes a contemporary observer who noted that 'the deficiency of the Sydney colonists is...that they have no severe intellectual interests. They aim at little except what money will buy'.[4] Dixson agrees with fellow Australian historian Geoffrey Serle that in nineteenth century Sydney, 'There is little doubt that writers and artists felt themselves to be confronted by a vicious and hostile society'.[5] Dixson goes on to say that colonial women lacked suitable role models, and that English intellectual women were 'far more confident and visible than Australian', and therefore constituted more robust leadership and inspiration.[6] Bensusan probably felt these conflicts keenly.

Not all historians agree with Dixson's theories of the impoverished history of white Australian women, which she argues resulted in holding 'low expectations of and for themselves'.[7] Elsewhere, due credit is given to feminist intellectual and cultural growth during this period,[8] which was closely linked to economic growth. These decades saw a

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[3] For one account of feminist journals of this period, see Olive Lawson (ed), *The First Voice of Australian Feminism: Louisa Lawson's The Dawn, 1888-1895*, Brookvale, 1990.

[4] Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to the Present*, (revised edition), Ringwood, 1984, p. 204.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] See for example Magarey, Rowley & Sheridan (eds). *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Sydney, 1993.

great period of urban expansion. Hundreds of country towns were founded around New South Wales, which in turn allowed greater diversity in social activities. Such developments, manifest in many external ways—particularly in sport and entertainment—could surely have inspired women.

> It is impossible to ignore the increasing self-awareness of Australian art, literature and political debate in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the colonists themselves, the questions could be stated in fairly simple terms: 'what kind of country is this, and is it to become?'[9]

However, Dixson's arguments have resonance in Bensusan's context, where both her parents were English born and recent emigrants. They were not typical Anglo-Saxon emigrants, and brought with them Jewish values about family, education, and life opportunities. Bensusan, then, perhaps had more opportunities—and different role models—than most Sydney teenage girls in what was emerging as a vibrant, pluralist society.

FAMILY LIFE

Bensusan's parents were married in Sydney in December 1861. Her father, Samuel Levy Bensusan, had been a 32-year-old bachelor, and worked as a merchant. Her mother, Julia Rosa Vallentine, was nineteen. Ten years later Inez was born on 11 September 1871, the sixth of what was to be ten children. By this stage her father was a mining agent, and two of her brothers were already dead. By the time Inez was seven, her mother had died at the early age of 36, shortly after childbirth.[10] When Inez was eight her baby brother died, and when she was eleven, her sixteen-year-old sister, Amy Viola, died following a seven month illness.

This birth and death rate was a fairly typical story for colonial times. Contraceptive devices and abortifacients were not freely available in Australia until the 1880s,[11] too late for Bensusan's mother even if she would have considered using them. While the births

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[9] Frank Crowley (ed), *A New History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1974, p. 197.

[10] Julia Bensusan was stated as having died of Rheumatism at their home at 146 Darlinghurst Road on 30 August 1878, after an illness of six weeks This death was certified by husband Samuel, and not by a doctor. Julia's last child, Gordon, had been born a little over a month before on 25 July.

[11] Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia*, Sydney, 1975, p. 319.

and deaths in Bensusan's family may be typical for colonial Australia, the fact that father Samuel did not remarry was not. He was wealthy businessman, constantly travelled, and had a large family. This begs the question 'what kind of community was Inez brought up in?' There was an abundance of relatives in Sydney, some of whom must have assumed responsibility. Bensusan's maternal grandfather, Benjamin Vallentine, was an important figure in the Sydney Jewish community, and his grandchildren would no doubt have received an education appropriate to his and their standing in the community.[12]

It is most likely that Bensusan's maternal aunt, Adele Haes, raised the Bensusan children. A family letter reveals that (brother) 'Darrell went to his Aunt in London (Halford family) when the mother died and her sister took charge of the large family including two girls, Inez and Orvida'.[13] That sister was probably Adele. Born in London in 1839, she married Frank Haes in New South Wales in 1858, who went on to become a photographer to the Royal family after the couple eventually returned to London, where Adele died in 1900.[14] After Julia's death, Adele probably functioned as a surrogate mother to certain Bensusan children, including Inez. As an adult, Inez reestablished contact with her aunt—who had left Australia—upon her arrival in England. These factual details about family ties, however, reveal little about developmental influences in Bensusan's life other than she was not without family care and support.

Perhaps the strongest influence in Bensusan's life was her father, whose success in life provided a role model for the virtues of intellectual thinking coupled with hard work. A member of the the Philosophical Society of New South Wales from 1869, Bensusan's father, informed by his own professional experiences, gave and published various speeches on Australia's future. He advocated that progress would be made possible by private enterprise, and hoped Australians were prepared to take risks in order to achieve more and develop industries of importance.[15] Whether or not Bensusan agreed with her

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[12] I would like to thank the Australian Jewish Historical Society in Sydney and the Jewish Historical Society of England for allowing me access to their archives. This information relating to Bensusan's family is mostly drawn from consulting records in their holdings, particular wills, and birth and death certificates. Dr A P Joseph in England was particularly helpful. Certain evidence was also located at Family History Centre at the State Library of NSW.

[13] Letter from Ethel Bensusan in London, 15 October 1970, contained in the De Lissa file (AJHS).

[14] Carroll Nicholson, *Some Relatives of Carroll and Nancy Nicholson*, Twickenham, nd.

[15] See for example 'Facts in American Mining', *The Journal of the Royal Society of NSW*, no 9, 1875, pp.

industrialist father is not important. She was, however, to embrace his entrepreneurial spirit in her own work, and later cared for him until his death in the home they shared in London.

THEATRICAL INFLUENCES

Jewish family life was not the only formative influence on Bensusan. She lived in a vibrant city with a theatre history all of its own, one that owed much to its Jewish traditions. In 1821 Barnett Levey came to Sydney as the first Jewish free settler, joining his brother, an emancipated convict. Remembered as the father of Australian entertainment', he founded Australia's first 'genuine' theatre, the Theatre Royal, in Sydney in 1832.[16] As one historian puts it:

> Fate seems to have decreed he should be involved in theatre for he was a gambler in business, a dreamer of grandiose schemes, a man with no specific trade or profession, and Jewish. These are classic ingredients for a theatrical impresario...and so it was with Levey.[17]

Exactly what the 'Jewish' ingredient was meant to add, there is no doubt that had Bensusan been seeking to draw inspiration from such a tradition, she would have found abundant examples in Australian theatre history One such example is that of ten year old Rachel Lazar, a dancer, who was probably the first Jewish girl to appear on the public stage in New South Wales. Another example is found in Miss Emily Nathan, later Mrs Grundy, who began working for theatre entrepreneur J C Williamson in 1881, and was associated with the company for more than fifty years.[18] Aside from the Jewish aspect of Australian theatre history, which begs further research. Bensusan was exposed to the broader traditions of Australian theatre.

The colony of New South Wales enjoyed theatrical entertainment from its beginnings, with ballads of convict life and amateur performances forming part of

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73-85.

[16] Katharine Brisbane (ed), *Entertaining Australia: The Performing Arts as Cultural History*, Sydney, 1991, p. 11. For a full length study of the Theatre Royal, see Ian Bevan, *The Story of the Theatre Royal*, Sydney, 1993.

[17] Bevan, *ibid*, p. 15.

[18] Lysbeth Cohen, *Beginning With Esther: Jewish Women in New South Wales from 1788*, Sydney, 1987, pp. 267-8.

Australia's popular entertainment tradition. Katharine Brisbane notes that improvisation and drunkenness were major characteristics of entertainment in the first half of the nineteenth century, a situation that did not markedly change until affluence resulted in larger and more luxurious theatres which attracted different audiences.[19] Brisbane's history of Australian theatre dispels many myths, including the prevailing one of Australia's isolation in the nineteenth century. British stage successes and famous actors travelled regularly to Australia, and were met with receptive audiences. Melbourne of the 1850s was reputed to be the richest city in the world, and there are many historical accounts that imply Australian audiences were intelligent, discerning, demanding, and appreciative.[20] During Bensusan's time in Sydney, Australians saw the rise of many great entrepreneurs, particularly J C Williamson, whose firm dominated Australian entertainment of this period and went on to become the largest theatrical chain in the world.[21]

Bensusan was surrounded by a wealth of opportunities as she focussed on her ambitions to become an entertainer, and she was not without suitable role models. Aside from the astounding numbers of notable international performers who visited Australia, documented by many historians, Brisbane in particular argues that the role played by women in the developing entertainment scene was a 'striking' and 'distinctive' feature of colonial theatre.[22] From the 1850s, 'hundreds of great female stars visited Australia', and these women along with Australia's own great expatriates including Nellie Melba, 'must have been role-models for many aspiring Australians'.[23] By the time Bensusan would have been considering her life and career options, the Australian entertainment industry was feeling the effects of a new conservatism which resulted from a fresh morality affiliated with the *nouveaux riche* of the colony's cities. In an entertainment world where

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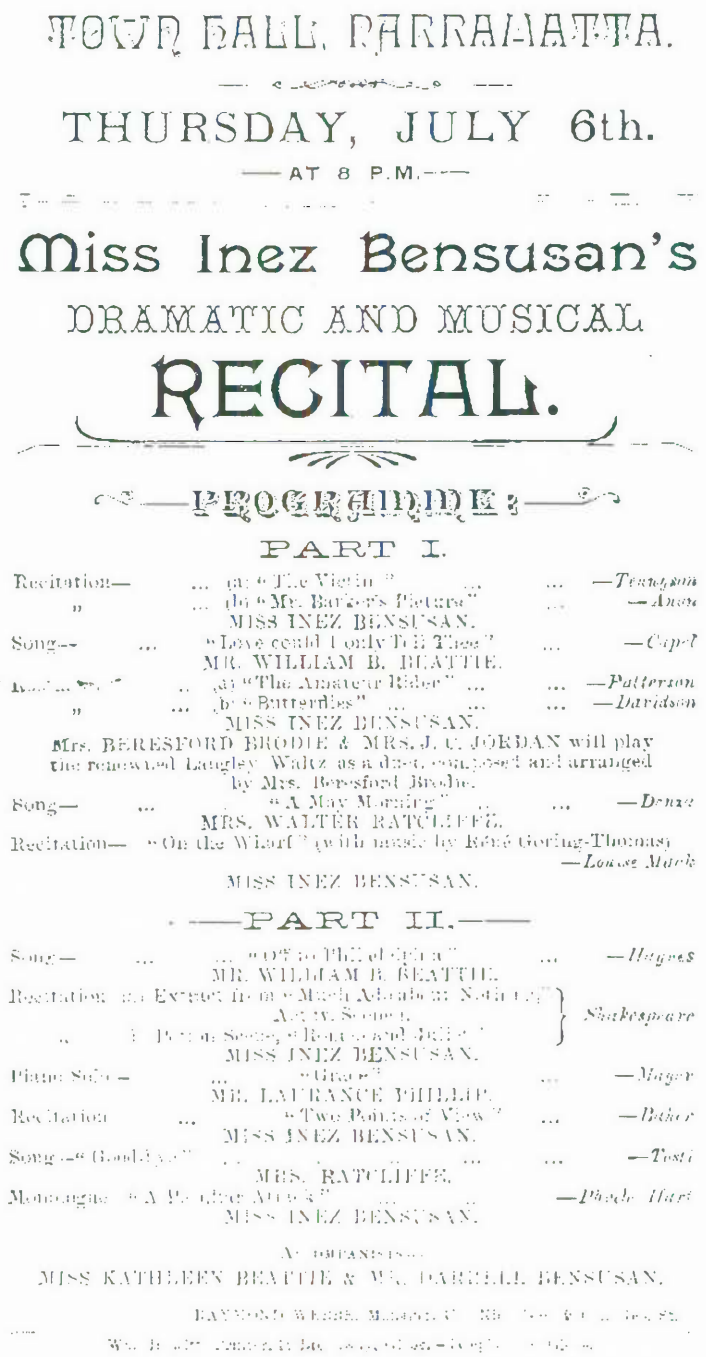
19 Brisbane, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

20 See for example the critic in the *Sydney Mail*, 1 April 1876, who concluded that there were 'few populations in any part of the world so keenly alive as ours to the merits of good acting', and this intellectual audience included the working class. Quoted in Brisbane, *ibid*, p. 2.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

23 *Ibid.*



TOWN HALL, PARRAMATTA.

THURSDAY, JULY 6th.

—AT 8 P.M.—

Miss Inez Bensusan's

DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL

RECITAL.

PROGRAMME:

PART I.

Recitation— ... (a) "The Victim" ... ... —*Tennyson*
" ... (b) "Mr. Barker's Picture" ... —*Anon*
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.
Song— ... "Love could I only Tell Thee" ... —*Capel*
MR. WILLIAM B. BEATTIE.
Recitation— ... (a) "The Amateur Rider" ... ... —*Patterson*
" ... (b) "Butterflies" ... ... —*Davidson*
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.
Mrs. BERESFORD BRODIE & MRS. J. C. JORDAN will play the renowned Langley Waltz as a duet, composed and arranged by Mrs. Beresford Brodie.
Song— ... "A May Morning" ... ... —*Denza*
MRS. WALTER RATCLIFFE.
Recitation— "On the Wharf" (with music by René Goring-Thomas) —*Louise Mack*
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.

PART II.

Song— ... ... "Off to Philadelphia" ... —*Hughes*
MR. WILLIAM B. BEATTIE.
Recitation— ... Extract from "Much Ado about Nothing" } —*Shakespeare*
" ... Dream Scene, "Romeo and Juliet" }
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.
Piano Solo— ... "Grace" ... —*Mayer*
MR. LAURANCE PHILLIP.
Recitation— ... "Two Points of View" ... —*Baker*
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.
Song—"Goodbye" ... ... —*Tosti*
MRS. RATCLIFFE.
Monologue— "A Professor Afloat" ... ... —*Phoebe Hart*
MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.

ACCOMPANISTS—
MISS KATHLEEN BEATTIE & WM. DARNELL BENSUSAN.

Figure 6.1 *Miss Inez Bensusan's Dramatic and Musical Recital, Sydney, 6 July 1893 (MM)).*

the theatre was recognised as being a traditionally freer society, and associated with loose morals, a musical career was a more respectable choice than an acting one.

Although she did perform as a singer in Australia, it seems that this period of Bensusan's life was more influenced by other professional dreams. For reasons unknown, the perceived lack of respectability attributed to actresses in no way deterred this talented, educated Jewess from a wealthy and prominent family from pursuing her ambitions. Figure 6.1 is the only evidence so far located of Bensusan's entertainment career in Australia. Interestingly for the period, it is obvious that Bensusan is not trying to make a name for herself as an singer, but as a dramatic actor. She performed scenes from Shakespeare as well as other dramatic recitations. Her concluding monologue, with its intriguing title and written by an unknown woman, could demonstrate what would later become a consuming interest in woman's playwrighting. At the very least it indicates what was probably an association with local playwrights. If Bensusan was writing plays herself during this period, so far none have been located. Plays by Australian writers, however, were staged more and more frequently from the 1860s onwards, and Bensusan was no doubt exposed to this development through her association with the Sydney theatre scene.

The performance noted above took place in 1893 when Bensusan was 22-years-old, most probably shortly before her departure from Sydney. What Bensusan's family thought of her career choice is not known, but the fact that her brother Darrell was an accompanist for the recital suggests that at least some members of the family endorsed and encouraged her decision. Emboldened by her successes at home, and sure of the reception of a moneyed and loving family in England, Bensusan was soon to join fates with many artistic Australians of her period, and succumb to the allure of the expatriate tradition.

ENGLAND, AND A DIFFERENT FUTURE

There is no formal record of Bensusan s departure from Australia, as there is a gap in the colonial shipping records during this era and records of departures are no longer available.[24] Bensusan must have left Australia between her 1893 performance discussed

[24] There is the possibility, if Bensusan was a performer of suitable note, that either her departure was noted by the press, or that she herself may have placed notice in the shipping news columns, as was

above, and her first recorded performance on the London stage in 1897. Enroute to England, Bensusan enjoyed a professional sojourn in South Africa, where she had stopped to visit relatives.[25] Eventually she made her way to London, which was soon to become her second home.

Unlike many Australians, and in contrast to the other women playwrights discussed in this thesis, Bensusan began her professional negotiations as an expatriate with distinct advantages which contributed to her success, not the least of which was financial security. Her grandfather was a commercial broker, and her brother Arthur, a mining engineer, and his wife Ethel, were soon to join her in England. Bensusan no doubt enjoyed the courtesies of family and the privileges of a comfortable life as she pursued her profession. She lived in fashionable addresses and mixed with wealthy and esteemed people.

From this secure position, Bensusan utilised her solid theatrical background and developed contacts in the theatre industry. Described as a woman of 'energy and inventiveness',[26] it was not long before she was earning her own way. Bensusan's religion led her to make extra social connections, many of which were very beneficial to her career. Israel Zangwill, for example, a well-known man of letters, playwright, and a suffrage advocate, became a close friend. He was later repeatedly to cast Bensusan in his hit play *The Melting Pot*. Such contacts made for a confident professional future for Bensusan, but acting was by no means the only thing she had on her mind. It was not long before Bensusan was directing much of her energies to the suffrage cause. How and when her political convictions were fired remains speculative, but Bensusan was surrounded by influential thinkers and reformers.

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customary. Random searches have revealed no such evidence; a systematic search, however, is underway.

[25] This aspect of Bensusan's life and career remains uninvestigated. A fuller history of Bensusan as an actress, and indeed any biography, would need to consider evidence from this period. The only evidence of Bensusan's time in South Africa comes from her listing in *The Suffrage Annual & Women's Who's Who* (London, 1913), where a passing comment refers to her acting career as spanning several continents.

[26] Holledge, *ibid.*, p. 66.

POLITICAL CONVICTIONS

Bensusan's sister-in-law Ethel Bensusan (nee De Lissa) and Ethel's sister Lillian rate a mention in the *Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records*, noteworthy because they were early Montessori educationalists in London. Born in Sydney in 1877, Ethel entered Sydney University in 1882. She was the tenth woman student and the first Jewish woman of the Women's College, graduating in 1897 with first-class honours in philosophy. She married Arthur Bensusan in Sydney in 1898, and they moved to London in 1901. Hypothetically, it could have been such influential women as Ethel and Lillian who introduced Bensusan to the suffrage cause, because education was an important issue in the women's movement. Ethel continued her studies at the London School of Economics. Later family accounts, however, indicate that Inez did not get on well with her sister-in-law, though this information concerns a later period in their life.[27] Bensusan's special affection for her brother Arthur and his children, amongst her large family, is most apparent in Bensusan's will.[28]

Although Bensusan may have learned much from Ethel, it is more likely that she was already acquainted with feminist politics from her time in Australia, where she was still living when South Australian women won the vote, and suffrage campaigns were well underway in other colonies. Bensusan formalised her political convictions in London where she joined and was active in many reform organisations, all of which were affiliated with the suffrage cause in some way. Published in London in 1913, *The Suffrage Annual & Women's Who's Who* includes a lengthy listing for Bensusan. Aside from noting her work with the AFL, it lists her as being an actress, and having published 'innumerable stories and articles in various magazines'. More importantly for locating Bensusan as a political creature, it records her memberships of various organisations. These included the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), the Australian & New Zealand Women Voters (ANZWV), the Jewish League for Woman Suffrage (JLWS), and the Women Writer's Suffrage League, (WWSL).

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[27] Letter from Robert Appleby, Bensusan's great-nephew, April 1994 (personal correspondence). Appleby's observations date from the 1950s, so it is possibly that Bensusan enjoyed a different relationship with Ethel during earlier times, especially before she abandoned her Jewish faith.

[28] Bensusan willed everything to her favourite niece, Jill Croxford.

ACTRESSES AS SANDWICHWOMEN.

[illegible] Winifred Mayo and other members of the Actresses' Franchise League paraded the streets of the West End yesterday carrying sandwich boards advertising their matinée at the Lyceum Theatre to-morrow.

[illegible]

Figure 6.2 'Actresses as Sandwich Women', The Standard, 26 October 1911. This clipping appears in the *Maude Arncliffe-Sennett papers*, vol 15 (BL) where Bensusan is labelled as being fifth from the left.

To take one example, Bensusan was a founding executive member of the JLWS in 1913. The JLWS were concerned to form a Jewish League agitating for votes for women, one that 'many would join...where, otherwise, they would hesitate to join a purely political society'. Their practice was to 'carry on propaganda on constitutional lines', and their moral tone was to 'emphasise the need for women's emancipation to secure the effective cooperation of men and women in combating social evils'. Beginning with fifty female and male members, by 1913 this had increased to 'some hundreds' with the subscriptions 'fixed at a low rate so as to enable Jewish Suffragists of all classes to join the League.' Meetings were held in all parts of London.[29] Bensusan's hard work for this league, though centred on the suffrage issue, was also devoted to improving the status of women in the Jewish community.

More militant, perhaps, was Bensusan's political work for the AFL. The above clipping shows Bensusan involved in the hard task of advertising an AFL suffrage play performance via a sandwich board on what looks to be a chilly October day. These activities, the least glamorous of the league's public work, were usually carried out by the most committed of members. Evidence such as this must be taken into account when assessing Bensusan's feminism; for example, was she a suffragist or a suffragette? A fuller examination of Bensusan's political work with the AFL follows in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

In 1910 Bensusan participated in a debate in London which took as its subject 'That the Granting of the Vote to Women Will Be Beneficial to the Nation and the Empire'.[30] Debates were used to train confident speakers for suffrage rallies, a duty from which Bensusan never shirked. As an enfranchised woman in the country of her birth, and as an expatriate who was reaping the professional benefits of her exile, Bensusan felt this paradox keenly. As a result, she became a zealous advocate for feminist change. By the time Bensusan joined the political organisations listed above, she was a mature, successful,

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[29] Suffrage Annual, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
[30] *Votes For Women*, 30 September 1910, p. 847.

and professional woman in her late th rties. She never wavered from her love of theatre, nor her belief that it was a great instru ment for social change, and used her energy and influence to perpetuate this belief. The following chapter moves on to a specific examination of Bensusan's professiona activities in an attempt to gauge how her personal politics informed her working life.