

Ashlyn Zunker

Introduction to London Theatre

Lee White

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Feminism in Theatre

In the last few years, we have seen a rise in shows created to highlight women's stories throughout history. This new movement is what people are calling “Feminist Theatre.” Some playwrights like to join in this new genre of productions by writing brand new woman-forward shows, while others have taken to retelling old stories. We see this in musicals such as *& Juliet* by David West Read and Max Martin and the spectacular *Six* by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. I was able to see both of these shows and found them to be both inspiring and a beautiful retelling of the lives of these historical women. However, is it just as easy to recreate classic stories without a banger soundtrack and flashy lights? In this new branch of Feminist Theatre, some classic plays have also been shifted in order to show a new perspective and to highlight the women who may have been written off before.

One classic retelling came from Shakespeare Globe in a spectacular new *Henry VIII* with Writer Hannah Khalil and Director Amy Hodge. The Globe states that their goal was to “Inject voices from across Shakespeare’s canon, shining a light on the women fighting for a place in a man’s world.” After seeing the production I can without a doubt say that they accomplished this beautifully. In this remarkable new telling, we focused specifically on Queen Katherine (Bea Segura) and Anne Bullen (Janet Etuk) and how they were affected by the King (Adam Gillen) and his lust. What made this retelling so incredibly successful was the way she was able to give so much humanity to the two Queens. Queen Katherine was not seen as the passive woman that

some people like to make her out to be in the past. Instead, she was strong and fought for her own justice as well as her daughters when they tried to send her away. She was a devoted woman whose honor remained intact no matter how her life crumbled when the King divided from the Church. Much like the way the Kings actions affected his first daughter Mary (Natasha Cottrell.) The world she knew began to fall apart when her father cast out her mother and resented her only because she was not the heir that he wanted. Additionally, Anne Bullen was seen as more human than I had ever seen her portrayed before. Instead of being written off as an evil seductress that tempted the King away, she was simply a woman in love. All she wanted was to be with the man that she loved and who seemed to be utterly devoted to her. All of these women and many more were just victims when it came to the Kings actions. We knew that Queen Katherine had given birth to many children but they did not survive leaving them with only Princess Mary. Shortly after the marriage of Anne Bullen and Henry, there is a scene where Anne stands on stage pregnant and joyful while pink balloons fall from the sky and in a fit of rage Henry pops every last one. Then the two Queens stand alone on stage looking at one another. The humanity given to these women came to this heartbreaking climate when we saw the two together and Anne realized that although she now had the King her life would not be the dream she thought it was. And when we look at Katherine she is not smug nor does she think ill of Anne instead she had nothing but sympathy for her. That connection is what drove the feminism of the piece. They were not rivals, they did not curse each other or wish ill. They were just trying to stay alive. It was not woman against woman. It was women trying whatever they could to make it in a world that was not meant for them.

Another production this season presented a group of young women who were also doing whatever they could do to make it in a world not meant for them. Although this story was more

than unsuccessful when it came to highlighting women. The National Theatre *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller directed by Lyndey Turner was a tragic attempt at Feminist Theatre. The play's description states, "Raised to be seen and not heard, a group of young women suddenly find their words have a terrible power." Although the young girls were hardly seen nor heard at all. The play was completely usurped by a man. In a story where women are repeatedly wrongfully convicted on false accusations, I would have expected to see more of the women, their hardships, their struggles, and overall their story. Instead, I watched scene after scene of nothing but a bunch of men arguing, without a single woman in sight. The young girls had no power nor stage time when it came to this production, that was until the end. In the final three minutes, there was a section of mini monologues by some of the young girls, most of which we had hardly heard speak until then. They had this brief moment where they talked directly to the audience basically telling us that this was a feminist play. Of course, they had to tell us, nothing in the production we had just seen would have led us to that conclusion ourselves. Unlike the humanity, we had seen in *Henry VIII* the young girls of *The Crucible* were more like robots than actual people. Throughout the play, the girls never presented the audience with any motivation as to why they had turned on the women in the town. They were painted to be these evil girls who did this for no other reason than to cause trouble, we saw no fear, no abuse, no love, and no reason that drove their actions. Therefore, the adulterate man was made to look like an innocent victim, and not only is this untrue but it completely takes away from any of the feminist qualities the play claimed to possess. It was an utter failure and a disgrace to what actual Feminist Theatre should be.

The contrast between these two plays is hard to believe when you take into account that they were both directed by women. Turner, director of *The Crucible*, and Hodge, director of

Henry VIII, are both very talented and well-known. So how is it when both presented with the same goal, highlighting women in classic stories, that one presented a revolutionary piece of art and the other a rather ordinary male lead show? What made the difference? Empathy. Hodge was able to give her women depth and empathy that made her audience cry. We got to see what women from that period had to go through and even when they got what they wanted it is never what they thought it would be. All the more impressive is that it came from work much older than Arthur Miller's time. It was not pity either. Neither of these stories were saying "oh look at these poor women feel pity for them please" and that is most certainly not what Feminist Theatre is. It was empathy that we felt for the two Queens, they never asked for it. It made us cry for them and mourned them. Hodge gave us real women that we could relate to and moments where, despite the decades that have passed, we could say "I know exactly how she feels." Tuner did not give us anyone to empathize with, no one to relate to, and therefore by the end when the young girls stood on stage and asked the audience to pity them the audience was unmoved. We had not been given any motivation to care about the girls or the situation they had found themselves in.

Feminist Theatre is a beautiful movement, women throughout plays history can finally have the justice they deserve and be honored. Writers today can rewrite history and take back stories that have been silenced for far too long. Shakespeare's women will be in the foreground and finally get the spotlight. Representation is a powerful thing and continuing to produce stories like this will inspire a generation of young audience members and teach them countless lessons that women have had to learn on their own all this time. Feminist Theatre, if done well will bring a beautiful new perspective to the world with countless new shows to enjoy. Besides, aren't we tired of seeing the same man win over and over again?

Sources:

The National Theatre: The Crucible <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/the-crucible>

Shakespeare's: Globe: Henry VIII

<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/whats-on/henry-viii-2022/>