

INTRODUCTION: RE-EVALUATING THE AFL

Founded in 1908 as 'a bond of union between all women in the Theatrical profession who are in sympathy with the Woman's Franchise Movement', the AFL was the first such organisation to orient its activities entirely around the politics of suffrage.¹ Neutral in regard to tactics, the League was formed to 'work for women's enfranchisement by educational methods', including 'Propaganda Meetings, Sale of Literature, Propaganda Plays and Lectures', and to 'assist all other Leagues whenever possible.'² The League produced and commissioned plays, participated in rallies and exhibitions and was fervently and productively active in the fight for the vote, creating a space in which professional feminist actresses could be, and be seen to be, politically engaged and active. Through the work of the League, performers and writers gained experience of involvement in direct action and constitutional campaigning, which supported their stance on issues that affected women in the theatre industry by placing their specific experience within a wider socio-cultural framework. Ensuring high-profile members were accessible to the public was a unique feature of the organisation – and through speakers' classes, regular appearances in public and in the suffragist, theatrical and national press, actresses learnt to communicate their political views with authority and confidence on stage and off.

This book was born out of my work primarily as an actress, performer and activist. I knew a little of the AFL but had not realised just how extensive and significant the organisation was. Nor had I realised that their work had carried on through two world wars and beyond, and had direct links to international feminist movements within the theatre. However, my hunch was that the League was more active, innovative and networked within the profession than previous scholarship had acknowledged, and I had many questions – particularly around the diversity of performers and performance genres represented by the membership, and the contribution of theatre professionals to the wider performative aspects of the movement. The answers were startling and exciting. Performers and audiences experienced, through suffrage plays and the

theatrical propaganda of the suffrage movement, a different kind of performance – one that directly examined ideas of political participation, representation and spectatorship. These performances played with cultures of display and performative propaganda, manipulating images, text, form and space to find new ways to interact with their audiences and to effectively blur the boundaries between ‘acting’ and ‘being’.

Jacky Bratton’s concept of ‘intertheatricality’, which she notes should not be confined to the female tradition, has been important in forging new appraisals of the known activities of the League and particularly in finding a means of connecting their professional work to the numerous political and social campaigns they espoused.³ Her intertheatrical model of creativity, in which ideas and acts of collaboration, performance and spectatorship require nuanced interpretation and analysis informed by knowledge of cooperative theatrical and social networks, is extremely valuable in an interrogation into the history of the AFL and its significance in wider histories of British theatre. Micro history – the local and specific used to generate a history of macro culture – is helpful as a means of constructing and considering new histories of the AFL, and the micro details of suffrage meetings, casts, events and even anecdotes evidence a well-established network of active and professionally effective women and men – actresses, actors, dancers, performers, writers, managers and producers who trained and built their careers together in the 1880s and 1890s. Biographical information also informs the micro, alongside factual data gathered from newspapers and archives forming the basis on which the everyday work of the League can be understood. There has been little consistent historiographically layered research around almost every aspect of the AFL’s work – and the weaving together of autobiographical and biographical detail remains vital as a means of building a fuller picture of an organisation whose members operated on many levels of visibility simultaneously. Apart from short pieces in collections of plays, references to individuals and biographies, there is no published comprehensive history of the AFL as an organisation that uses this approach. The intention of this book is to therefore take some steps towards realising this project.

While the book aims to both contribute to a reimagining of the League and to be a first attempt at a full account of the organisation, five areas of the AFL’s work are explored in critical detail. Four chapters consider different aspects of the League’s work within the context of the suffrage movement before the outbreak of the First World War, and the fifth and sixth chapters examine its contribution to feminist and

social campaigns from 1914 to 1958. This introduction reviews material published by and about the League that has shaped the presence of the organisation in existing histories of feminist theatre, political theatre and the suffrage movement. The first chapter, 'Exhibition', looks at the participation of the League in large indoor suffrage exhibitions, fairs and bazaars between 1908 and 1914, introducing their work within the context of the performative propaganda strategies of the suffrage movement and its interventions in public visually oriented space. Here I consider the representations of women and womanhood in suffrage plays and popular entertainments, explores the ways in which womanhood was represented and commoditised by the suffrage societies and how theatre and performance was used to explore issues around violence, imprisonment and political campaigning. Drawing from accounts of the 1909 Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) Women's Exhibition, the chapter introduces an examination of the broader scope of performance practices as an integral component of the strategies of the suffrage societies. Chapter 2, 'Sisterhood', explores the networks of some League members before 1908 and the support of male theatrical professionals. Looking at other social and feminist issues that affected and concerned League members, the chapter considers the impact of the Census Boycott of 1911, includes brief accounts of the work of suffragist actresses in variety and vaudeville and briefly explores the contribution to the American suffrage campaign by three suffragist actresses allied to the AFL. The third chapter, 'Visibility', looks at how the issue of women's suffrage was portrayed in *The Era* and how information about theatrical support for women's suffrage was circulated in the industry press. Intending to broaden current scholarship, this chapter also focuses on the actresses who were visible as suffragists both in public and in the theatrical profession, through suffrage processions and newspaper-selling in particular, and the plays and journalism integral to that visibility and interaction. The fourth chapter, 'Militancy', investigates activism and direct action by suffragist actresses. Drawing on the stories of actresses who were imprisoned and arrested, the chapter also explores representations of militants and militancy on stage and includes analyses of the conflicts expressed privately and publicly within the League about the issues surrounding militancy. The fifth chapter, 'Hope', begins with an analysis of the AFL's Woman's Theatre project and charts the work of the organisation and its portfolio of wartime projects between 1914 and 1918. This chapter also includes the work of the League after the First World War and the continuing campaign for equal female suffrage.

The final chapter, 'Legacy', charts the work of the organisation from 1930 until 1958. Attempting to draw together what is known about the League post-1928, the chapter details the continuing connections with the theatre industry, introducing research that will hopefully be a springboard for more scholarship. This final chapter reflects upon the story of the League, their contribution to the suffrage movement, its many projects and its influence within the theatrical profession over half a century of campaigning. As a whole then, *Stage Rights! The Actresses' Franchise League, Activism and Politics, 1908–58* also aims to renew interest in, and suggest more nuanced ways of looking at, the work of the AFL as a unique organisation that revolutionised the ways theatre women operated professionally, socially and politically during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Women, theatre histories and marginalisation

When I began reading about the Victorian and Edwardian actresses I was presented with a picture of them as handmaidens to the great actor managers, male dramatists and directors of the day; I had no idea they had created their own theatre.⁴

For an influential feminist organisation at the heart of both the Edwardian theatre industry and the campaign for women's suffrage, there is surprisingly little information about the AFL available in the public domain. The first formal study of the AFL, Julie Holledge's *Innocent Flowers* (1981), based on her Ph.D. research, broke new ground in the field of women's theatre history and was an influential component of an emerging feminist awareness and analysis in the 1980s of the history of women's theatre practice in the UK.⁵ It is not surprising that Holledge had originally been unaware of the AFL – although mentions of it existed in some autobiographies written by actresses between the wars, the organisation and its work was excluded from academic and popular theatre histories of the twentieth century. Subsequent mainstream theatre histories of the period have sometimes included suffrage theatre but rarely, if at all, explored the significance of the League within the history of theatre and professional practice between 1908 and 1914 and beyond. Therefore, with a few exceptions, the idea of Victorian and Edwardian actresses as 'handmaidens' has been pervasive, and where the League's work is recognised it has been more generally contextualised within histories of the suffrage movement rather than the theatre industry. Prompted by *Innocent Flowers*, new accounts of the League's work began to appear through the 1980s and

1990s, with scholars uncovering previously overlooked archival material and using it in combination with Holledge's findings. These discoveries created a framework for the AFL that often seemed to set the story of the League in relation to existing histories of the suffrage movement, rather than to theatre histories, which has meant that it has not been widely or effectively mapped onto, for example, explorations of the socialist and political theatre of the early twentieth century. Writers such as George Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie and prominent actor-managers such as Johnston Forbes-Robertson, F. R. Benson and Granville-Barker are not recognised for their support of and collaboration with the AFL or suffragist actresses but are known for their socialist and political interests. Without this political, socialist and feminist context to inform recent literary critiques of suffrage plays and the work of suffragists in the theatre, they have been easily dismissed and judged as amateurish and ephemeral – outside of the mainstream commercial contemporary theatre. When considered merely 'a lively part of the London fringe theatrical scene' the subtlety, wit and intelligence of suffrage plays, full as they are of parody, pastiche, nuance, humour and political commentary, has often been obscured.⁶ In reality, the AFL was not on the 'fringe' of its theatrical world but created and performed work in spaces and with performers at the heart of the commercial industry.

Popular or industry-generated theatre histories written immediately after the Edwardian era did not generally champion or detail the work of feminist women and men. Journalists, commentators and critics such as St John Ervine, Max Beerbohm and Walter MacQueen-Pope created a fictionalised theatrical world, relying heavily on anecdote, gossip and critical barbs in their memoirs. Largely written for an amateur readership or fan base, these books are neither expressly analytical, reflective of the wider cultural context of the period nor explicit in their references to individuals or networks. Where women do feature they are invariably portrayed as being without creative agency of their own – much like the 'handmaidens' of Holledge's imagination. MacQueen-Pope's evocative, nostalgic remembrances of the Edwardian theatre milieu mention many actresses who were members of the AFL while avoiding the issue of women's involvement in political theatre and subsequently sidestepping any engagement with feminist campaigning. Although he did mention the 'Suffragettes – or the Wild Women – or the Shrieking Sisterhood', he also asserted that 'Equality did not appeal to the late Victorians or early Edwardians en masse'.⁷ Jim Davis, describing MacQueen-Pope as a 'latter day Canute', reflects on his protective presentation of an imagined

theatrical Golden Age, seeing his dismissal of women's suffrage as just one among a number of key political and social changes affecting a transition in the theatre that he was reluctant to acknowledge – including socialism, film and 'the inexorable tide of modernity'.⁸ These little remembered histories may seem too general to be useful as source material for any scholarly attempt to map the work of the AFL, but their popularity has contributed to a general attitude that assumes the work of the League and of suffragist actresses was insignificant in its own time. Immediately after the First World War, the AFL was written out of popular histories of the theatrical work of the period and consequently later histories based on the earlier works. This is in part to do with a lack of acceptance of particular forms of political theatre – the perception of suffrage plays as realist comedies focused on middle-class issues, as overly commercial or as populist non-'literary' plays – but it is also symptomatic of a more general refusal to embed histories of women's professional theatre work into standard histories of theatre per se.

In their own words: suffrage plays, preservation and publication

In her chronology of plays addressing or supporting suffrage issues, Susan Croft lists 120 plays in all from 1907 to 1914 – not including 'plays from the wider culture on suffrage themes and women's rights, unless they were part of a campaign or reviewed as suffragist in the press'.⁹ Edwardian feminists talked to themselves and each other in public space and through the medium of the stage, finding a convention – the theatre – that meant their views could be stated, 'played out' live and be heard with the minimum of disruption. Where verbatim accounts of speeches or accurate documentation of any one individual's involvement may be lost, many of the plays remain, and these can be used as a way to chart changes in style, language and argument over the course of the later suffrage campaign. Part of the impetus behind this book has been to find ways of embellishing existing scholarship through providing a more nuanced approach to the layers of complexity that characterise suffrage drama. The subtleties of the texts produced by the AFL, the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL) and suffragist playwrights cannot be understood without an appreciation of the context in which they were written and performed. For example, for the AFL to maintain its stance on neutrality regarding activist tactics, it could not have published plays that promoted militancy directly or explicitly. Reading these plays through the lens of the research

process has revealed them to be more precious and important than I had previously imagined, and even less deserving of the relegated status they still have in the scholarship of this period. With so little written about the movement in the autobiographies and biographies of those involved – where they exist – it is suffrage plays that seem to speak most clearly and freely of the period, employing challenging and complex representations of contemporary women and men in both allegorical and literal settings, drawing on verbatim accounts of the experiences of those within the movement. Plays published by suffrage societies were marketed, sold and designed with the suffragist customer in mind – and, conversely, suffrage plays published by mainstream theatrical publishers may have been less visible on first sight as political propaganda to a general theatre-going public. A few were successful in the UK and internationally, giving a voice to suffragist audiences as well as performers, and allowing them to imagine and create environments and characters that reflected their own lives and ideological interests. Here it is important to note that there were also pro-suffrage songs, operas, music-hall sketches, dances and films that deserve more detailed consideration by scholars working on suffrage and performance histories. These are unfortunately beyond the scope of much of this book.

The idea that ‘preservation is linked to publication’ is an important one.¹⁰ The print culture in which suffrage plays were first made publicly available was immeasurably different from today. Many of the plays were published either in subscription or weekly journals, or by small and limited clientele publishers – rare in our contemporary corporatised publishing world. The publication context was quick and not necessarily designed for a literary market. Suffrage plays appear to have been relatively free from the pressure of commercial frameworks and have therefore been seen as largely outside of the business model of the industry as a whole. The speed of access now made available by the Internet has meant that many of these plays have only recently become more widely available to more than a limited academic market. Tracing the trajectory of anthologies of plays reveals the different kinds of agendas at play over a number of decades around the politics of women’s theatre work and the politics of (re)publication. If the number of British suffrage plays is at least 120, as Croft’s research asserts, just over a third, forty-four in all, have been republished since Holledge’s 1981 book. Undefined for publication by specific criteria as even these forty-four have been, there are many more which could be considered to be suffrage plays, depending on the criteria applied. Susan Carlson has acknowledged that, in order

'to understand its full presence and effect', suffrage theatre needs to be broadly defined, while Katherine Cockin has noted that it is hard to create a canon of suffrage plays so early on in the process of scholarship around suffragist theatre: 'Some plays which could be included in the category of women's suffrage drama are not immediately recognisable as such, demanding familiarity with the history of women's suffrage, its arguments and campaign issues'.¹¹ Therefore almost any piece written from the late nineteenth century onwards and performed at a suffrage meeting, or a piece performed by a suffragist cast, or a play containing a positive suffragist or suffragette character, or work that addresses issues around women's rights or social issues affecting women's lives, or indeed any play written by a known suffragist playwright or a playwright sympathetic to women's suffrage might qualify for inclusion.¹²

The forty-four plays published by scholars since the 1980s have generated a second, limited canon of suffrage plays in which some, such as *How the Vote Was Won*, have dominated anthologies and have come to be representative of the field. Because the plays published have not been organised in any specific way – there are, for example, no volumes of the collected works of individual suffragist women writers – it has been difficult to approach this second canon without generalisation. I have concluded that while it has been vital to republish this body of work, there has often seemed to be little thought for grouping the plays by theme, date, provenance, audience or topic. One might argue that the plays have been published almost haphazardly in an attempt to show the diversity of the genre, but the varying quality of writing, contextual information provided and evidenced performance history has sometimes stifled rather than amplified the communicative potential of the plays. Equally, the politics and economics of the publishing industry impacts on what might be published from this body of work, how it might be published and for what market. In part, then, the project of this book is to bring together informed and integrated contextual research from both suffrage and theatre histories. The ideas the AFL explored through plays, events and activism remain relevant for current campaigners, and it is both heartening and disheartening that despite their very specific language, cultural references and ideas, suffrage plays still speak successfully to audiences today, as issues around the lack of social and political equality for women remain and are in many ways still prevalent in the theatre industry. The League's work shows that agitation for equality for women at all levels of the theatre industry began long before the women's theatre movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Fortunately, feminist campaigners within the

theatrical professions have easier access to the histories of the suffrage movement and the AFL than ever before, which will hopefully create more interest in and awareness of the work of this creative, pragmatic and inspiring organisation.

In their own words: autobiography, archives and ephemera

Remembering has a politics.¹³

One of the most challenging elements of researching the AFL is the lack of detailed archives of the organisation and its members. Annual reports from the pre-First World War period are held in the Women's Library at LSE, and many of the plays published by the League can be found in the Museum of London's collection. However, apart from published press releases, detailed accounts of the work of the organisation are elusive. Where records exist for the years after 1914, they provide a vibrant and evocative glimpse of the diverse work AFL members were engaged in, and evidence of their contacts and networks, and it is to be hoped that raising the public profile of the organisation within the present-day theatre community may prompt the discovery and recognition of further private archives and related materials. The new levels of accessibility provided by the Internet have transformed access to the potential comparative use of data and information. Where there are no autobiographies or known papers, a few details of the lives and careers of the most active and long-serving members of the League can be gleaned from newspaper reports, interviews and obituaries found online. Suffrage newspapers provide invaluable sources of material about meetings and events involving the League and League members, and a significant number of issues of the WSPU paper *Votes for Women*, the Women's Freedom League (WFL) paper *The Vote* and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) paper *The Common Cause* have been scanned and are available for free online, as are hundreds of other contemporary newspapers and journals.¹⁴ Jacky Bratton and Grant Tyler Peterson's notion of a 'digital historian' complements more traditional archival research methodologies – the AFL archives held by the Women's Library and Bristol Theatre Collection have not been fully catalogued or digitised, but the amount of information in online newspaper archives augments the existing papers and allows for a greater appreciation of the networks that League members were part of both in the UK and further afield. As the latest date in the League's papers in the Women's Library is 1916, much of the piecing together of

their work after that date carried out for this book was made possible through archival research in person and online. Far from a cognitive lapse induced by the notion that 'if something cannot be found online, it does not exist', this method of research and enquiry means that unexpected connections found through online research create in turn new avenues for paper-based archival exploration.¹⁵ The archive is thus virtual, concrete and fluid – it has become larger, more accessible and, perhaps, more productively interrogated. Concern among feminist theatre historians around the loss of the story of the League reflects the current struggle to maintain the archives of feminist activism and theatre that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and continue into the twenty-first.

Previous scholarship has relied heavily on autobiography and the limited archives of the AFL. Taking into account problems and questions around authenticity, bias and dates of publishing, there is relatively little in autobiographies that can be used to give an indisputable or full picture of any one period of the League's work. Published autobiographies of League members are rare, particularly those by the most long-standing and active members, meaning that interpretations of the autobiographical writing of a few prominent individuals have come to represent the League in scholarly writing. The existence of the AFL has also been used as a general context for further discussion of these individuals rather than as a direct part of the historian's interest. Of the eight actresses involved in the League who published autobiographies between 1924 and 1948, only three – Lena Ashwell, Cicely Hamilton and Elizabeth Robins – have been the subjects of further biographical scholarship, in addition to the extensive work by Katharine Cockin on the life of Edith Craig (1998, 2001). Eva Moore's *Exits and Entrances* (1924), Lillah McCarthy's *Myself and My Friends* (1933), Gertrude Kingston's *Curtsey While You're Thinking* (1937), Irene Vanbrugh's *To Tell My Story* (1948) and Kitty Marion's unpublished memoirs (undated) are among the autobiographical writing that include mentions of the League, the suffrage campaign and the contribution of the theatre community to the war effort both at home and abroad. None of the autobiographies cited were intended to be *political* memoirs, however, the 'coaxers, coaches and coercers' of the stories being principally fans, theatre aficionados, other industry professionals and a general audience, and therefore attempts to verify dates, names and events with other source material sometimes fail.¹⁶ Material gleaned from contemporary interviews and articles can also be unreliable, and, after 1914, suffrage and suffrage theatre are rarely if ever the focus of journalistic interest.

Inevitably, narratives around political agency become charged in hindsight, as the act of remembering is an act of rewriting experience self-reflexively, informed by changed cultural contexts and interpretations. Maggie B. Gale's writing on the autobiographies of actresses working in this period notes the underplaying of some personal and professional relationships in favour of others and the creation of a 'framework of cultural reference points ... the public knowledge of which helps the author to create a particular slant on their own life'.¹⁷ Despite this 'slant', for the historian accessibility is key – there are authoritative voices from the AFL in diaries, letters and papers, but they are rarely tempered by later reflection or scholarly analysis and so can be hard to contextualise effectively.

In summer 2014, I made a pilgrimage of sorts to the Suffolk village in which Adeline Bourne, one of the founding members of the AFL, lived during the later period of her life. Knowing her house to be no longer standing, I had not made the journey before, considering it to be of sentimental rather than research interest. Upon reaching the site of her property, now a field, I turned back but was stopped by a woman in a nearby house, understandably curious as to my presence there. To my surprise, she revealed that she knew of Bourne and that her papers had been stored in her garage for some years, rescued from a fire that had destroyed Bourne's home after her death. Having read through the papers, looked at photographs and letters, and found suffrage memorabilia – a 'Votes for Women' armband, for example – among Bourne's belongings, she had tried to look for information online, with no significant result, and kept the items in storage out of a sense of history, hoping that perhaps one day they would be useful to someone. Unfortunately, in 2013, while she was unexpectedly ill, she said that a visiting family member had burnt the papers, letters, photographs and memorabilia without asking her permission, destroying the whole collection. The knowledge of the loss of this archive, however small it may have been in scope in reality, was devastating. If I had visited that spot when I had first learnt of the address a few years earlier, I could perhaps have looked through the archive, and the content of this book might, as a result, be very different, or even differently nuanced. While that knowledge of 'lack' is endlessly frustrating, the existing archives that remain, scattered in libraries, museums and private collections – often where they are not expected – provide significant data that, as yet, has not been fully explored. The original research on the AFL carried out prior to the digitisation of historical materials relied largely on a limited breadth of materials – papers, autobiographies, programmes and so on – archived somewhat haphazardly. Ironically, additional material, such as

the lost papers of Bourne in Suffolk, might have been similarly 'forgotten' even if it had been in an archive, just as the work of the League and its satellite projects has been. Even though the information about those organisations has been in public and specialist repositories for decades, no one has as yet examined it as part of the story of the AFL. It would not therefore be an excessive overstatement to suggest that the League was and remains embedded in two worlds: as an organisation with a complex matrix of professional and political agendas, articulated in play-texts, performances, in professional practices, in public politics and politics within the theatre industry of the day, but more generally and more significantly than has been previously explored.

New perspectives and a new generation

The work, membership and legacy of the AFL has fallen between suffrage and theatre histories with neither approach providing a broad enough profile of the League that allows for a nuanced analysis of their work. Suffrage historians have focused on the League's contribution to the spectacle and pageantry of the movement at events, particularly processions,¹⁸ whereas theatre historians have attempted to connect the work of individuals in the organisation with existing histories of the late Victorian period and the New Woman movement. As a result, the scale of their work and the longevity of its effect as well as their international membership and influence have barely been covered. This has also meant that complexities and ambiguities, particularly around the issue of suffrage militancy, have been largely ignored. With few published analyses of suffrage societies other than the militant WSPU, it is not surprising that the League's work for the Women's Freedom League (WFL) and NUWSS, as well as many other smaller societies, has not been detailed. This in turn has meant that their decision to remain neutral with regard to tactics and to support all other societies has not been considered to be an integral part of the success and longevity of the organisation. Nor has it created the background for a more nuanced reading of the alliances of the League within the suffrage movement as a whole. The Suffragette Fellowship was founded in 1926 by former WSPU and WFL members 'to perpetuate the memory of the pioneers and outstanding events connected with women's emancipation, especially with the militant suffrage campaign'.¹⁹ Members of the still-active AFL were involved with the organisation and continued to attend and speak at Suffragette Fellowship events as late as 1955,²⁰ but as many of the most

active League members were non-militant, their later connections with specific suffrage organisations apart from the Suffragette Fellowship and the AFL are less well recorded. An example here is the work of Teresa Billington-Greig, a suffragist and vocal critic of the militant movement, who prepared notes for an essay on ‘The Theatre and the Suffragettes’ that was never completed.²¹ If it had been completed and published in the 1940s as intended, or later included in the collection of her writings published posthumously in 1987, it would have informed later scholarship about the League from suffrage historians.²²

Re-evaluation and renewal

The action of retrieval and revision ... has to progress and be refreshed through time: it is a fluid and continuous process.²³

This book has been written in the midst of a renewed awareness of the history of feminism, the suffrage movement and public debate about opportunities for women in the theatre industry. There has been a rebirth of interest in the relationship of suffrage histories and performativity, coinciding with and encouraged by newly accessible research materials and data, developments in theatre historiographic practice and the official release of documents from this period. The AFL had a very specific professional political and ethical standpoint around issues of gender equality in the industry and in society more generally, and a deliberate strategy around professional practice informed by a political agenda. As both performance studies and histories of women in theatre and theatre historiography have developed extensively since the 1980s, there is now perhaps a language within the wider discipline of theatre studies through which the material produced by the League can be read.

The year 2013 saw the public commemoration, particularly in the press and on television, of Emily Wilding Davison’s fatal accident at the Derby – probably the most widely publicised act of suffrage militancy and one that has come to represent the movement in the public imagination. This created debate about and tapped into concerns around the freedom of individuals to demonstrate politically on the streets and in public spaces, equal rights, police tactics, the representation of women and the responsibility of government, all of which remain current concerns for feminist campaigners. Despite the fact that there are relatively few original documents available that detail the League’s activities, the intellectual and political work the organisation was engaged in resonates

very strongly with activists in the theatrical profession today. Genuinely embedded in the theatre industry on a long-term basis, and for its members the AFL was the starting point of a lifelong professional network and a strategic politics of practice in an industry that relied on women's labour while awarding women relatively little professional power or agency. The work of the AFL defies absolute categorisation, spanning as it does fifty years of activity within the worlds of politics, feminism, suffrage, theatre, art, journalism, socialism and literature. The breadth and success of the work of the League from 1908 to 1958 show the unifying threads of collaboration, public visibility and activism as extending further than has been previously recognised. As this book proposes, by provoking, reflecting and exploring the debates surrounding the suffrage movement, the AFL provided opportunities for hundreds of performers and writers to lend their professional names and talents to the cause, forming a new and specifically political theatrical activist group that could draw on and utilise a variety of performance styles and influences, in theatre, dance, music and literature. Therefore, further research on the AFL has the potential to enrich not only the history of the period but debates and scholarship within theatre history and performance studies around performance and performativity, site-specific theatre, political theatre and unionisation, experimental theatre forms, entrepreneurship, audiences, women's writing, gender and networks.

A re-evaluation of the work of the AFL is thus both necessary and timely and places the League at the heart of future scholarship about the histories of political theatre in the UK, encouraging scholars to revisit the theatrical texts created around the agitation for women's suffrage. *Stage Rights! The Actresses' Franchise League, Activism and Politics, 1908–58* therefore aims to reclaim the organisation from marginalised histories of theatrical contributions to the suffrage movement and to renew and refresh existing histories of feminist theatre in the UK. My hope in part is that this book will inspire others to draw together and highlight parallels between the first- and second-wave feminist movements in order to inspire and educate the third, fourth and subsequent waves.

Notes

1 AFL, *Annual Report 1913–14*.

2 A.J.R. (ed.), *The Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who 1913* (London: Stanley Paul, 1913), p. 11.

- 3 J. Bratton, 'Reading the intertheatrical, or, the mysterious disappearance of Susanna Centlivre', in M. B. Gale and V. Gardner (eds.), *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 7–24.
- 4 J. Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Virago Press, 1981), p. 165.
- 5 J. Holledge, 'Women's theatre – women's rights', Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 1985.
- 6 M. Sanderson, *From Irving to Olivier: A Social History of the Acting Profession in England, 1880–1983* (London: Athlone Press, 1984), p. 110.
- 7 W. MacQueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven: The Story of the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Robert Hale & Co., 1947), p. 219.
- 8 J. Davis and V. Emaljanow, "'Wistful remembrancer": the historiographical problem of Macqueen-Popery', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 17 (2001), 299–309.
- 9 S. Croft, *Votes for Women and Other Plays* (Twickenham: Aurora Metro, 2008), p. 216.
- 10 K. Cockin, G. Norquay, and S. Park, *Women's Suffrage Literature*, vol. III (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. xi.
- 11 S. Carlson, 'Comic militancy: the politics of suffrage drama', in M. B. Gale and V. Gardner (eds.), *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 198–215, at p. 212; K. Cockin, 'Women's suffrage drama', in J. Maroula and J. Purvis (eds.), *The Woman's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 127–39, at p. 134.
- 12 B. Friedl, *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1987). Friedl's anthology of American suffrage plays spans the years 1856–1917.
- 13 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 24.
- 14 These can be found on Google newspapers (www.news.google.com/newspapers).
- 15 J. Bratton and G. Tyler Peterson, 'The internet: history 2.0?', in D. Wiles and C. Dymkowski (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 299–313, at pp. 306–12.
- 16 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 64.
- 17 M. B. Gale, 'Lena Ashwell and auto/biographical negotiations of the professional self', in M. B. Gale and V. Gardner (eds.), *Auto/biography and Identity: Women, Theatre and Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 99–125, at p. 114.
- 18 See L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989); M. Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (New York: Knopf, 1975), and D. Atkinson, *The Suffragettes in Pictures* (London: Museum of London, 1996).

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