

INTRODUCTION

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Stage Women, 1900–50: Female Theatre Workers and Professional Practice brings together recent research exploring women's participation in the theatre and entertainment industries during the first half of the twentieth century. Its chapters variously explore their professional practice and partnerships, their careers, celebrity and cultural status, and the intersections between the social, the historical and the professional that shaped their working lives.

The decades covered in this collection are more usually divided or periodised as 'Edwardian', 'First World War', 'interwar' and then 'Second World War', with specific decades described as 'the roaring twenties' and 'the hungry thirties'. Recent years have seen a renewed focus on the period around the First World War (1914–18), marking the centenary since its beginning and end, and on the anniversary of the Representation of the People Act (1918) which brought with it enfranchisement for a wider demographic of the population than ever before, and specifically for many women over 30.¹ Media coverage and popular and scholarly literature have recently reviewed the role of women more generally in this moment. As editors our aim has been to add to and extend this reappraisal, through curating a volume of essays that focuses specifically on women, theatre and performance. The collection provides broad-based coverage and analyses of women's professional practice in theatre as actresses, activists, teachers, administrators, writers and popular performers over a period bookended by the death of Queen Victoria and the decade of major social reforms epitomised by the establishment of the welfare state and the beginnings of organised state funding through CEMA and the Arts Council of Great Britain.

The women whose working lives are discussed here lived through the struggle for enfranchisement, the First World War and the transformation of the arts bought about by technology. Some, such as Ellen Terry and Ada Reeve, had careers that found momentum in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods; others, such as Gladys Cooper and Margaret Rutherford, worked up to and beyond the mid-century. Some, such as Winifred Dolan and Mabel Constanduros, radically shifted professional roles: in Dolan's case from working with George Alexander in the West End to teaching drama at a convent school; in Constanduros's from middle-class housewife to radio performer and writer. All of them lived through a range of legislative changes that impacted on their work and personal lives as women, as well as a series of profound changes to their industry including, but not limited to, the invention and rise of stage photography, radio drama and film. Many of the women featured here found themselves working across media – Ellen Terry experimenting with film late in life; Gladys Cooper moving into film in her forties and back to theatre in her seventies. Others, such as Lily Brayton and Lilian Litzel, continued to work in more singularly defined practices and performance contexts. The transformation of visual cultures during the period enabled an enhanced circulation and commodification of women's presence in the industry.

Many of the chapters included here explore and contextualise how this impacted on women's sense of professional agency, both as individuals and in terms of public understandings of their status. Access to professional status was still relatively new to women at the beginning of the period covered here. Women's work was largely presumed to be connected to domestic duty, and in practice various marriage bars prohibited women from having equal employment status to men. Prejudice about women's capacity for the sustained accumulation and application of professional skills added to existing inequities in terms of social status and citizenship: assumptions that women were unsuitable for traditionally male professions such as medicine and law prevailed. The few women with access to university study could not officially be awarded degrees until the late 1870s: in the case of Oxford University not until 1920 and Cambridge, 1948. While small numbers of women were qualified in medicine by the last decades of the nineteenth century, women could not, for example, practise law or accountancy until the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. Jane Lewis notes that both direct and indirect discriminatory practices sustained the inequities in women's professional status in occupations

from teaching, through medicine and law, to the civil service (Lewis, 1984: 220).

Harold Perkin's assertion that these decades saw the continuation of the 'rise of professional society' is of interest here, as it resonates with developments in the theatre and performance industries in particular (Perkin, 1989). Various associations and formal professional affiliations began to dominate by the early decades of the twentieth century, as part of a continuing move to specifically professionalise the industry and raise its social status. While not 'equal', women had much more access to professional status within the theatre and performance industry than elsewhere (Davis, 1991), and indeed, they understood how professional associations could improve their security of employment and range of professional choices (Gale, 2019; Paxton, 2018). Nevertheless, heightened levels of professional status offered in the industry existed within, and were shaped by, wider social frames of inequality. This is the context within which the women whose working practices are explored in this volume negotiated their own, often extensive and prolific, professional lives.

As a group, those born at, or working from, the latter end of the nineteenth century were the first generation of women in the performance industries for whom there are substantial amounts of visual memorabilia and, in some cases, films of their work. In reading and assessing their professional lives we have the benefit of a proliferation of photographs, postcards, memorabilia and audio and audio-visual records of performances. Increasingly through the networked space of the internet, discussed in more detail later in this introductory chapter, we have faster, more connected access to such materials which were once only available in archives with limited access. Similarly, fans and enthusiasts have created their own free-to-access archives where, for example, one might find extraordinary collections of postcards or lovingly digitised magazines, born of the dedicated free labour of fandom and an obsessional drive to collect and collate materials on performance.

Theatre is possibly one of the most networked of professions. It relies on tacit knowledge of layered networks in terms of their function, membership and the cross-currents between them. Several of the women discussed here were friends and colleagues, advising, assisting and supporting each other, and were knowledgeable about each other's work. One of our concerns in bringing this collection together has been to draw attention to the variety of ways in which women worked over the period, both on- and offstage, and how they used their personal

connections and experiences to further their professional aspirations and secure economic stability. Their networks were not always as formally constituted as the Actresses' Franchise League discussed by Naomi Paxton, or the Theatrical Ladies' Guild discussed by Catherine Hindson. Some were characterised more by shifting affiliations and practices and, as a result, can be more challenging to map. In response to such a challenge Catherine Clay, in her study of British women writers between 1914 and 1945, selected three *foci* to reveal the personal and professional networks of writers including Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Stella Benson. These *foci* are geography – based on different areas of London; publishing – specifically *Time and Tide* magazine; and critical frameworks for understanding the changing nature of female friendship (Clay, 2006).² Clay mapped a web of connections emanating from *Time and Tide* that reveals a number of women who also make recurrent appearances in this volume: Cicely Hamilton, Christopher St John and Elizabeth Robins. St John, who contributed a weekly music column to the magazine, was the partner of producer and director Edith Craig, the daughter of Ellen Terry (see Katharine Cockin's chapter). St John, Craig and Terry were friends of Gabrielle Enthoven, the focus of Kate Dorney's chapter. Robins and Hamilton were prominent members of the Actresses' Franchise League, the focus of Naomi Paxton's chapter. The phrase 'small world' seems both an entirely appropriate response to this shared network of creative, politically motivated women working in and around London, but also entirely inappropriate in that it belies the still circumscribed area in which women were operating.

Clay reconstructs and analyses these networks through a range of 'unpublished material, notably letters and diaries, supplemented by such published writing as fiction, poetry and autobiographical memoir' (Clay, 2006: 2). She acknowledges an additional 'recuperative dimension to this study to make "forgotten" lives and writings newly visible' (2006: 2). In many ways our collection shares her approach to a similar range of sources, but rather than merely 'recuperating' forgotten lives, we seek to ask, and explore the complexities of, why these lives or works might be 'forgotten' and what the processes of their forgetting can tell us about historiographical practices in relation to theatre and performance histories more generally. The theatre workers examined here can be mapped through professional associations (working in the same shows), through personal connections, through their work in particular forms of performance and through the public presentation of their autobiographical selves or their legal status as professional citizens, as Maggie B. Gale and

Viv Gardner demonstrate in their chapters. There are of course different levels of forgetting, and as we go on to explore, this is not just to do with a 'gender agenda'. It is as much to do with the ways in which certain kinds of theatre and performance histories are written: women's labour often falls victim to processes of historical forgetting, but it is not the only victim.

Stage Women is divided into two sections, 'Female theatre workers in the social and theatrical realm' and 'Women and popular performance'. While coverage is largely focused on British case studies, Veronica Kelly, Kate Holmes, Brian Singleton and John Stokes are concerned with performers whose work was also circulating outside Britain, demonstrating transnational networks in action. Equally, and notwithstanding their individual focus, the issues raised by our contributors have a global resonance, especially in terms of Anglo-American theatre and performance histories. The scope of coverage allows for the interweaving of onstage and offstage lives both in terms of professional practice and of the materials used in the construction of narratives around the personal and private. Tracy C. Davis's oft-quoted proposal that we need to connect the woman and the work 'and the work with the world at large' (Davis, 1989: 66) remains as pertinent now as it was in the late 1980s. Almost three decades have passed since this invitation, during a cultural moment that saw the beginnings of a substantial production of research on women and performance histories from second-generation feminists. These revisionist histories may not have yet permanently altered the dominant narrative (Bennett, 2010), but they have challenged that narrative by complicating a conveniently over-simplified picture. The documentation and reading of the complexities of women's labour have troubled and thickened traditional historical narratives more generally, both broadening the repertoire of the workers whose labours are explored and assessed, and re-focusing the methodologies through which such scrutiny is processed. This revisionist approach has provided new perspectives on women's vital and productive roles in the theatre and performance industries. Writing in the late 2010s, it is still crucial to maintain the momentum of unearthing and repositioning the materials that such an approach facilitates.

The research represented in this collection of essays by established and early career researchers reveals a range of recent work that sets out to counterbalance the still discernible limitations of studies of women's careers. Influential work has been done to retrieve key figures from relative obscurity, but these accounts often exist within a frame where the

successful professional woman is perceived as an outlier among a field of men. It is interesting to note here the gendered tension between a revisionist history that expands the field of enquiry, and one that deepens the field. So for example, a publisher might be far more open to *another* book that offers a *different* perspective on the same (male) practitioner, than it would to another study of a female practitioner who has already been 'researched'. Playwright Susan Glaspell and producer/director Edith Craig are perhaps two notable exceptions here. The series Women, Theatre and Performance was set up in the 2000s precisely to deal with this tension, and has the support of a publisher that is genuinely interested in both expanding and deepening histories of women in the arts. Moreover, there is now a new generation of research on women's theatre. Naomi Paxton's *Stage Rights! The Actresses' Franchise League, Activism and Politics 1908–58* (2018) goes back to the history of the AFL and moves research on its extensive activity forward from the work of Holledge (1981), Kelly (1994) and Hirschfield (1987). As well as enriching the documentation and analysis of the AFL's work in the 1910s, Paxton focuses on its continuities beyond the initial campaign for suffrage, and assesses its stronger connection to work within the theatre industry of the day.

Like many of the practitioners explored in this volume, while the work of the AFL has been marginalised, it was not marginal in its time but both prolific and highly publicised. Those names that have made the journey forward in time and remain in our consciousnesses are not necessarily the names that gained significant public attention in their day, as Hindson reiterates when reporting back from her explorations of the biographical files of individual actresses which are part of the Mander and Mitchenson Collection.³ This is not just the case with women's labour of course, but the work of women is more likely to be discarded, to be dislodged from the contexts in which it was made, or to be embraced by a revisionist history and then 're-forgotten'. Our bookshelves now contain multiple studies of female theatre and performance professionals – playwrights, directors, performers – and anthologies of plays and performance texts by women, none of which were available thirty years ago. While our curiosity can be sustained, only a limited number of these works have become embedded in the kinds of theatre and performance histories taught to students for example, or those written for the general public. The complex task of both undoing and revising history is ongoing.

It may be that to use new histories to 'revise' history we have to re-embed them in that process of revision, to make them *work* by embracing

them and applying them as part of a more generic discourse on theatre and performance histories. So, for example, we have written elsewhere (Dorney and Gale, 2018) that it is surely time for a new volume with a similar historiographic approach to Tracy C. Davis's landmark study *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (1991). Published almost thirty years ago, this remains a major reference point. What if, however, it became a point of departure for a new study that takes a similar frame for investigation, and makes use of newly available research materials and methods to connect and explore changing patterns of employment, labour and productivity through the early part of the twentieth century, during a time of expansion, and beyond? Why is there only one such study currently? There are multiple studies of the director, so why not the actress?

Theatre and performance histories, 1900–50: historiographic approaches

Contemporary histories of the period covered in this volume remain somewhat beholden to the 'modernist project': a project in which the text dominates, and most frequently the male-authored text. Critical histories are often built around plays or groups of connected playwrights, rather than other types of theatrical material or events. Thus we find more treatments of relatively obscure modernist plays than we do of popular or commercial workers or their work. The theatre industry of the period is often viewed as conservative, commercialised and positively middle-brow. This was in fact an era in which new forms operated alongside or even developed from established ones, when there was a consistent sense of emergent cultures functioning productively alongside, and moving between, both dominant and residual cultures, to use Raymond Williams's terminology. In the UK, we have very few academic histories of the period from the 1900s that focus predominantly on what the majority of audiences went to see, on commercial or even popular stages (Savran, 2004). Such histories would open out all kinds of avenues for exploration in terms of the social and of histories of leisure cultures. While there may have been ideological reasons for their exclusion in the past, their exclusion now creates limitations to our understandings of how theatre and performance cultures function in social, relational and historical terms. It is also, incidentally, in the commercial sector that women's labour has had a more discernible and consistent presence, building substantially from the nineteenth century (Bratton, 2011).

As noted earlier, the period covered in this volume might well be characterised by the sense of significant social as well as technical transformations: political activism around issues of class, labour and gender equality, social care and citizenship also shaped the arts. In her work on early cinema Christine Gledhill noted that ‘opposition between art and commerce tapped into unresolved class issues under pressure of democratisation’, and that these gave shape to debates on the relation of the cinema, and we would suggest the performing arts more generally, to the ‘social landscape’ (Gledhill, 2008: 20). It is this division between art and commerce, and sometimes the conversations between the two, that shapes many of our theatre and performance histories of the period. This division, false as it is in practical terms, has also historically been one of the roots of exclusion in terms of assessments of women’s labour in the industry of the early to mid-twentieth century. Just as practitioners and critics from the era debated the logistics of, and business case for, ‘art versus commerce’, so too theatre workers more generally reflected on their sense of ‘the professional’ and on their own professional practice. Women have a particular place in such reflections, in part because of their unequal social status and in part because of their own particular and complex position in the professional hierarchy of the fast-developing industry itself. As we have previously noted (Dorney and Gale, 2018), the sterling work of nineteenth-century theatre historiographers in the process of unpacking and rethinking fabricated silos of theatrical activity has not always been taken up by those working in the early twentieth century. Here a hierarchy of literary or hagiographic approaches still predominates, a factor that this volume attempts to challenge in its inclusion of diverse practices and people.

Our attitude in *Stage Women* has been to prioritise the need for a more holistic approach to understanding both the theatre and performance industries of the period, and the roles played by women in the development of those industries. This requires us to open up the historiographic aperture as it were, to try and read the period as composed of contrasting forms and registers of work by women rather than focusing on individual elements. Rethinking the historiographic approach to the period involves applying more nuanced understandings of the complex and dynamic interplay between different areas of the industry and the workers within it, as well as more nuanced understandings of the interrelationship between a social culture and the arts cultures it produces. Here, then, work carried out for the commercial sector is not left as sediment while the non-commercial rises to the top. In the US,

scholars have produced more multi-dimensional readings of the industry of the period, offering historiographic and compositional strategies that embrace and connect commercial, popular, modernist, literary and visual performance cultures. In so doing, their analysis of women's labour overall has been more successful in creating gender-inclusive histories (see Glenn, 2000; Marra, 2006; Schweitzer, 2009). This volume applauds such a strategy, and intentionally participates in an agenda that embraces the idea of looking at what connects female performance workers, rather than what separates them or indeed makes them atypical. In putting together the volume our objective has been to refresh and extend a continuous history.

The theatre and performance industries over the period operated as social and cultural domains, as places of employment, as well as being the location for the production of art and entertainment works. In the absence of state funding, theatres were largely places of business, and the business of art held a fascination for those both within and beyond the mainstream. Female professionals belonged to *both* the commercial *and* the independent sectors, working in theatre and film. A fluidity of employment between one form of theatre, performance and arts practice and another was not uncommon. Equally, as a number of the chapters in this collection evidence, the necessity and ability to shift between different professional roles – writer, performer, manager, producer, public servant and philanthropist – was not uncommon.

The business of women in theatre and performance

Katharine Cockin's chapter locates Ellen Terry as a performer interested in film as a new medium late in her career, an interest with a significant economic imperative driving it. Like Lily Brayton – in her day as well known and loved as Terry – fame and celebrity did not necessarily equate to financial liquidity. Brian Singleton's and Veronica Kelly's chapters demonstrate how carefully even successful artists and shrewd businesswomen, such as Brayton or Muriel Starr, had to negotiate the precarious tensions between fashion, touring and financial viability in their response to the market. Actresses and theatre workers also responded to social need; thus Naomi Paxton's chapter looks at how an association of politicised women theatre workers developed practices of networking, organising and producing that brought achievements beyond their theatrical endeavours into the social world, despite extant prejudice against women's labour that prevailed even in a time of need

such as the 1914–18 war and its aftermath. Catherine Hindson has published on actresses and charity in the theatrical sphere elsewhere (Hindson, 2016); here she turns her attention to one event where a number of actresses, networked through being in the same theatre production, engaged in charity fundraising, also for the war, by ‘retailing’ their considerable charms in Harrods. They displayed a growing awareness of their cultural commodity value, where their appearance was offset by public exposure and an opportunity to engage with and extend their fanbase.

Here, equally, it is difficult to discuss labour without reference to exploitation, and Viv Gardner’s chapter explores the interstices between willing exposure and collaboration in self-commodification, and the appropriation of image or reputation as cultural cachet by opportunists. This is achieved through delineating contemporary law cases, some of which had surprising outcomes. Thus, when one actress was sacked as a ‘dispensable’ chorus girl, the courts agreed with her self-definition as an actress against the industry’s interpretation of the contractual framework of her employment. Maggie B. Gale also explores the ability of actresses to exploit their own professional achievements and sense of agency through the autobiographical form. John Stokes thinks through how we might read the career of an actress who grew into her performance persona late in her professional life and through film: Margaret Rutherford’s career was sustained by her ability to create herself as the ‘odd woman out’, the exception to the rule as an actress who marketed herself through *precisely* her lack of glamour. While these chapters tell very different stories, they connect in their attention to the dynamic complexities of women’s professional lives and their ownership of their own professionalism in practice.

Negotiating the tyranny of plenty: theatre and performance historiography in the digital age

The generation of research is dependent on funding, on the politics of publishing, on the appeal of historical research in theatre and performance more generally – an appeal that is in a fairly constant state of flux. Historical research is expensive and labour-intensive. Even with the enhanced levels of accessibility to archives created by the internet, it requires heightened levels of curiosity, time and patience. While we are perhaps in a moment of renewed interest in all things historical, in putting together this volume we are pleased to be offering alternatives

to dominant histories, to facilitate an undoing of the 'facts' of history as we receive them. Our hope is that this volume contributes to the creation of more fluid histories, more multi-purpose narratives that not only question the place of gender in history, but the formation of historical narratives themselves.

Our ability to add more lives and practices to the existing historical repertoire has been eased immeasurably by the digitisation efforts of various libraries, archives and commercial organisations over the last two decades and by Web 2.0. The digitisation of newspapers, of census records, of plays, biographies and autobiographies, of manuscripts and of photographs, designs and prints has reduced the amount of time it takes to find at least some 'facts' about a person, regardless of their ongoing visibility or whether they ever made it into *Who's Who in the Theatre*. The challenge for us as historians is not simply to assemble the facts, but to read them, and the absences that the internet cannot resolve, in a critical and, after Jacky Bratton, 'intertheatrical' manner. In *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003), Bratton advanced the idea of intertheatricality as way of re-interrogating dominant ideas of early nineteenth-century theatre as a period of decline, by looking again at the available evidence and reading it 'intertheatrically', the theatrical analogue of intertextuality. Thus, an 'intertheatrical reading goes beyond the written. It seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users', it requires us to be aware of the 'elements and interactions that make up the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players' (Bratton, 2003: 37). Bratton demonstrated this through her readings of histories, anecdotes and playbills, showing that rather than just abstracting the 'facts' of the playbill (who, what, when, where, for how much?) in order to create a new document or verify an existing one, it could be approached as a text that offers clues as to what its first readers already knew, not only by what is written, but by what is not written – the audience's knowledge of theatrical conventions, of other shows, and of the ways in which they and the performers are expected to behave.

Contributors to this volume have similarly sought to articulate the mesh of connections between early twentieth-century theatre practitioners and their audiences on- and offstage, ever mindful of the dilemma of the challenge of proliferating evidence (Bratton and Peterson, 2012). Bratton and Peterson discuss the extent to which Web 2.0 creates plenitude and democratises access to information, but also leads to

the proliferation of inaccuracies, dubious readings and a disregard for authentication. As a result Peterson sees a space for academics as

the ones who help solve the abundance issue. We can develop the critical acumen to discern, navigate and critique these new forms of information. We can expand our cognitive maps of our subject to include, accommodate and filter a multitude of sources that engage with our subject and also to possibly address new and larger audiences. (Bratton and Peterson, 2012: 311)

Bratton, who has stated that there is no such thing as ‘too much’ as far as she is concerned, articulates a different concern, one that we have shared as editors of this volume, a concern to provide a ‘platform on which we may climb in order to challenge the incumbents and hope to be heard’ (Bratton and Peterson, 2012: 311). We are at pains in this volume to challenge both incumbent histories and the tyranny of plenty, and to pay attention to the particular. Thus the chapters by Lucie Sutherland, Kate Dorney, Veronica Kelly and Gilli Bush-Bailey are concerned with thickening the sparsely documented professional lives of their subjects and using them as examples of what these ‘untypical’ women’s lives might tell us about the history of the industry more generally. Similarly, the chapters by Catherine Hindson, Maggie B. Gale and Kate Holmes articulate the tension between a researcher’s expectations on approaching archival material and the realities of what the archive contains. Some of our authors have relied more than others on reading the materials available in archives – whether digital or not. All, however, attempt to enhance and deepen our processes of archiving women’s theatre and performance labour as historians.

In conclusion then, *Stage Women, 1900–50: Female Theatre Workers and Professional Practice* offers an exploration of theatre as a networked world, the dynamics of which reflect our own age much more than current histories might allow. It explores the work of women theatre and performance professionals within the context of a diverse, multifaceted and complex industry that was constantly developing and changing, alongside its audiences, in relation to market forces. Critiquing and celebrating careers that converge and cross over the broad and various employment opportunities offered by the theatre and performance industries, the contributors to this volume take an interdisciplinary approach to reading and celebrating women’s professional lives as central and integral to the shaping of the theatre and performance industries of the first half of the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 All men over the age of 21 were granted the vote, along with women over 30 who met a property qualification, which meant that only 40 per cent of the UK female population were eligible to vote until an amendment in 1928. While the Representation of the People Act in 1918 increased the male voting population from 8 million to 21 million, it gave only 8.5 million women the vote, and even then not on equal terms. See <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/> (accessed 24 August 2018).
- 2 *Time and Tide* was a weekly magazine founded by Lady Margaret Rhondda. Originally connected to the feminist Six Point Group, it focused on politics, literature and the arts and was published from 1920 to 1986. See Spender (1984).
- 3 This is now part of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection.

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