

# Maggie Gale

## Milestone Women

High on the list of best-selling books in Britain at the moment, is a dual auto/biography written by the wife of a much beloved and now sadly passed away British actor who created an extraordinary number of popular roles for British television from the 1970s onwards. The author, Sheila Hancock, is herself an actress and in fact has worked successfully in theatre and television much longer than her perhaps now more famous husband, John Thaw, did. Although she had previously written about her work as an actress and as a director, I had not realised just how much she had done in theatre and how radical much of that work was in its time. In writing a book about her husband and in creating a stunning narrative thread which weaves together her own life and his, she successfully wrote about the needs of her own work and the way this had to be balanced with children, domestic life and his depressive, alcoholic personality. Strangely, one never really gets the sense of their relationship - he was too involved with work and drink to pay her any attention through cancer and various other debilitating diseases and they did not, it would appear, talk about the inevitable close of their own relationship because of his own cancer. She talks of being appalled at being asked, late in life, to audition for a tiny role in a television programme, about her disappointment at not winning an award for one of her later roles and of her coming to Shakespeare as a director mid-career - but she never really talks about method, about her ethos or approach to her work.

For every woman listed below, there are many more who have been left out: this is just a list of some of the women who have spent their professional lives working in theatre and who have interested and continue to interest me personally as a theatre historian. Some of these women have been studied by academics and practitioners and their histories have, to some extent, been re-examined and re-constructed. But others have not been examined in any

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detail and the analysis of their professional contributions to the development of theatre practice and performance remains un-processed. Why we choose to look at certain women over others is not a question which can be dealt with here. But in general, many of the women in this list connect to, worked with or were married to "more famous men" of theatre. Thus they rarely wrote about their own work but often about their husband's or lover's and so on. What many also share in common is the strong and active belief in the power of theatre to reflect and question social injustice, or in the power of theatre as an aesthetic form to bring about real social or personal change or simply insight.

I have often looked for insight in terms of their method or approach when researching particular practitioners and feel as if I always go back to the same question - am I researching this person's career because she did something special or just because she *did* something significant at all. To be honest I research those whose work interests me, or who seem to have achieved much, over a sustained period, in the face of adversity.

Without doubt historically it has been harder to survive professionally as a woman in certain kinds of theatre. Without doubt women who have worked in more popular theatre forms have fared less well in terms of feminist revisionings of theatre histories, but women still do not feature in a way which reflects their level of contribution to theatre. But I suppose from a sociological perspective I am interested in the notion of career and for me women who play the role of milestones are those who sustained and developed a theatre career over a long period of years. That they didn't recognise the importance or uniqueness of their own working methodology is perhaps something we as historians have to draw out of their writings - they themselves might not recog-

nise what we recognise as methods: a clear way of working unique to their own practice. On the other hand, we might have to recognise that their work may simply not have been driven by methodological questions, that they in fact wanted to, or needed to, earn a living from one of the fastest growing yet most economically precarious industries.

So my sometimes-annotated list of milestone theatre/performance women has no logic although many of those listed are connected to each other in some way. Many of them provided me with milestones in the directions of my own research; one often led the way to another or provided a point of opposition.

**Aphra Behn:** a witty and prolific woman playwright working in the late 1600s. She spied for the Crown and worked in a theatre system dominated by the nobility. The first professional woman playwright on our curriculum when I was a student and the first Restoration playwright whose writing made me laugh out loud. She was a pioneer and an adventuress.

**Susanna Centlivre:** of the same period. Her plays were still being performed over a hundred years after they were written. She was a pioneer and a comic writer.

**Nell Gwynne:** much maligned and joked about as the Catholic mistress of King Charles the First. We actually know very little about her, the first actress of working class origins to work in the theatre. She was an artist and a pioneer, not just the woman who upset the nation by bedding the King.

**Madame Vestris:** invented the black box, fourth wall set so hated from the 1960s onwards. Worked *en travestie* in the mid 1800s and was known for her legs! But, at the same time, she introduced the idea of

paid rehearsals and fines for actors who did not turn up to rehearsal on time. She stripped the inside of a theatre bare and redesigned it with plush seating and carpeting. She was a pioneer.

**Elenora Duse** and **Sarah Bernhardt**. Images of these actresses' work continue to haunt.

**Constance Collier**: a beautiful woman who began her career as a Gaiety Girl, a kind of window dressing in the grand London West End theatrical fashion extravaganzas of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Collier continually re-formed her career, she worked with the greats of her day and moved from theatre into film with ease. She wrote an autobiography in the late 1920s after she had nearly died of undiagnosed diabetes and come back to dominate the London stage with her roles in the plays of Somerset Maugham. She wrote with Ivor Novello one of the first run-away cult hit films of the day and then went to work in Hollywood as a voice coach and in film. The child of a travelling performer (her mother had been a child performer who as an adult found less and less viable employment on the tour circuits) who supported her family financially from an early age. She had many ideas about voice production and about the potential for theatre to be a poetic experience. She was a pioneer.

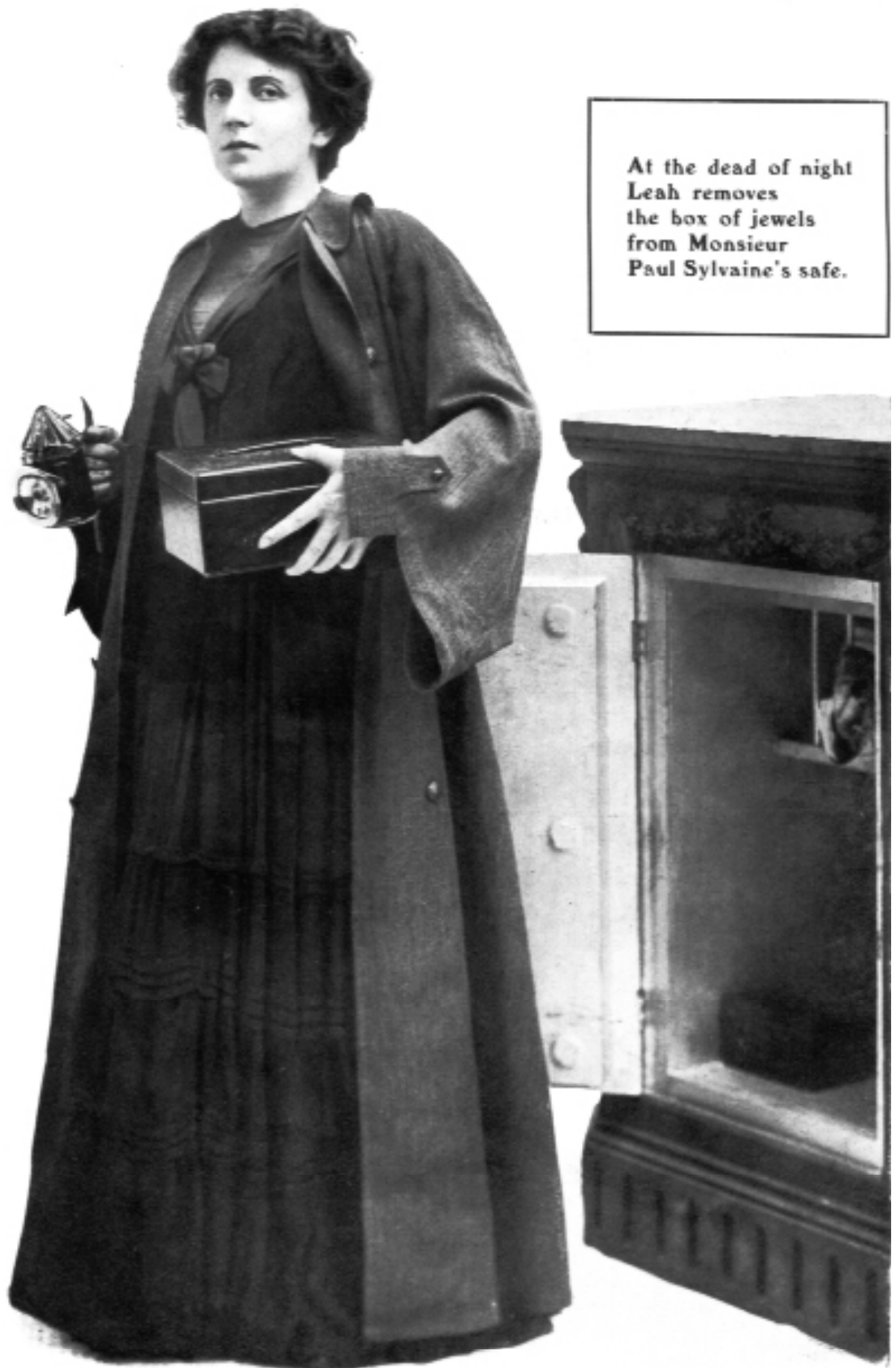
**Lena Ashwell**: actress, manager and producer. After a successful career as a leading lady, she turned to touring theatre to the troops during World War I and followed this with ten years of running tours in the economically deprived suburbs of London. Hers was a poor theatre and a training ground for young actors. She was a pioneer, whose many ideas on the art of acting have yet to be extracted from her four autobiographical works.

**Isadora Duncan**: famously castigated by the much lauded Edward Gordon Craig because he could not understand why she wanted to float about in silks rather than stay at home and sharpen his pencils, Duncan's work with the body in space lies at the basis of modern dance. She questioned women's role in dance and at the same time questioned the form itself. She was a pioneer.

**Löie Fuller**: invented stage technologies far ahead of her time in order to facilitate her ideas about the female body in time and space. She wowed audiences all over Europe and America with her fabric and light shows. Fuller crossed over between the popular and the avant-garde and managed her own career as well as those of other artists with inventive flair. Antique Art Nouveau lamps with women draped in huge flowing and moving silks are a testimony to the inventiveness and the beauty of her dances. She was an artistic icon, but she was also an inventor and a high class manager of theatrical and performative events. She was a pioneer who had her finger on the pulse and manipulated the direction of dance and performance practice.

The Suffrage women: **Edith Craig**, **Cicely Hamilton** and **Inez Bensusan**: these women connected their political beliefs in equality between the sexes to their own work as theatre practitioners. They enabled other women to do the same.

The women of the historical avant-garde: **Emmy Hennings**, performer; **Mary Wigman**, dancer and choreographer; **Leonora Carrington**, painter and writer. Women who were part of the spirit and movement of the avant-garde; women who produced extraordinary innovative art.



Lena Ashwell as Leah Kleschna

**Gladys Calthrop, Sophie Moisewich, Marie Laurencin, the Motley Sisters** - all changed the professional status and viability of women designers in theatre. They were pioneers.

Women of the Music Halls, the Cabarets and popular stages of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century: **Jenny Hill, Vesta Tilly, Yvette Gilbert, Marie Lloyd, Maud Allen, Athene Seyler, Sophie Tucker, Josephine Baker, Ruth Draper, Beatrice Lillie, Gertrude Lawrence, Mae West.**

Women who managed theatres: **Emma Cons, Gertrude Kingston, Violette Melnotte, Lilian Baylis, Hallie Flanagan, Gladys Cooper.**

**Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell:** two American expressionist writers who experimented with playwriting as a means of investigating and expressing the female condition. Treadwell worked with musical form in her writing and combined her journalistic experiences with a keen ear for the rhythms of jazz in her writing. They were pioneers.

As we come nearer to the present time the list becomes longer and yet some of the histories of these women will never be written - what about **Buzz Goodbody**, first woman director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, or **Claire Venables**, director of new work, educational officer at the Royal Shakespeare Company until her untimely recent death.

If we still haven't produced a thought provoking and detailed analysis of the great and powerful **Joan Littlewood's** work, her method, her theories, her approach (this is a woman who changed the direction of the job of the director in British theatre; she trained many actors and worked with new writers; she introduced improvisa-

tion and dance into the rehearsal room; she alienated the funding bodies, but carried on to produce the most innovative theatre happening in Britain between the mid-1950s and late 1960s) - then when will anyone ever get round to writing about the huge numbers of other women who have helped to develop and sustain theatre of all persuasions.

It is strange that I had to read about her husband to get a real sense of the career of the best-selling author/actress Sheila Hancock. But this is the case with many hard working actresses. As we come to the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The Open Page*, I am glad to be part of a project which encourages women to write about their work in theatre and which in turn takes responsibility for helping to shape their expressions of experience.

MAGGIE B. GALE (Britain) has been working with *The Open Page* editorial team for ten years. She has recently taken up the post of Chair in Drama at the University of Manchester in England. Current research projects include a study of Ruth Draper and Joyce Grenfell for *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, which she is editing with John Stokes, and a study of the playwright and theorist, J.B. Priestley.