

# Maggie Gale

## What Text Next?

### (CON)TEXT - A THEATRE HISTORIAN

I am thirty seven. I work as a theatre academic. I will give some examples of what I do.

I get sent a lot of emails.

I supervise student work, I direct productions.

I teach courses on devising theatre, women and theatre, textual analysis...

I go to too many meetings where too little is decided.

I organise people and things.

I earn enough money to support my family which consists of myself, my husband and two young boys.

I do the washing. I hang the washing to dry. I put the washing away.

I tidy up a lot.

I read - I never read enough, but I read as much and as often as I can - a lot of text passes before my eyes. Often the same words but in different contexts and with different significances. With two children, one of them a young baby, and a demanding full-time job, I miss being able to read as much as I want, but this has led me to use text more carefully. The opportunities to use text, or read text, or hear text are precious. This is the current perspective from which I write.

*It is peculiar that text  
and language are one  
of our basic forms  
of communication and yet  
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of their potential  
to the wind.*

### TEXT LANGUAGE AND PLAYS

*... what versatile things words may be...  
contained within them, can reside other words, nowhere set  
down and forever invisible to the eye, but having an existence  
just the same.*

Rose Tremain *Music and Silence*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 264

I have never been a purist but I love the possibilities of purity within language; at the same time I yearn for language which offers so much more to the imagination than that which lies written on the page. It is the same with theatre: I

don't really go to see the standard repertoire anymore, theatre culture has so much more to offer. Very few playwrights offer the same perception or use of text as does say a sculptor of space, although some understand the immense possibilities of a physicality of language. In my culture this includes a playwright like Beckett. Otherwise much of the repertoire is too closely tied to the current social neuroses of the middle and ruling classes.

Over the past fifteen years, I have been absorbed both in the repertoire and in the struggle to expand the repertoire to include the work of the "other half", that is to say, women. As a theatre historian I remain amazed at the inability of the academy to expand its vision of either what theatre may have once been or could be in future, via a real integration of women's creative theatre work into the field - it is almost always separated, a sideline, a note in the margin, a specialism.

In terms of text, texts and contexts, my area of research covers reclaiming and revising theatre texts written by women and produced in British theatre over the first five decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many contain the same level of attention to social neuroses as mentioned above, but their existence shifts our perception of what theatre history is and offers us new ways of seeing women as cultural workers in a fast changing theatre culture. Still for me, as theatre, the texts are largely inadequate. After reading so many plays for so many years I often find myself bored by them, whether they are by men or women. This is a terrible thing for an academic, working in a drama department, teaching "drama", to admit, but it is the truth. I am looking for a different use of text - text as history, and a different kind of text - integrated text, text as sculpture, text as movement.

It is peculiar that text and language are

one of our basic forms of communication and yet we throw so much of their potential to the wind. We live in such a throw away culture in the West, and we throw away or overlook so much of theatre's potential. The misuse and overuse of text is sometimes, it seems to me, the reason for what is often called the crisis in our theatre.

### THE TEXTS OF THEORY

I haven't written much about the theatre and performance which I enjoy and actively seek because, I don't see how to write about it without getting caught up in the quagmire of so much theory. As Jacky Lansley points out in her article for this issue of *The Open Page*, in the world of dance, so much is being written about the dancer and the dancer's body that the dancer and the dance become almost invisible.

Similarly, we have so many academics writing about performance, performativity, the performing body, the intertextuality of performance, the commodification of performance, the subliminal and the liminal in performance (and on and on and on), that there is absolutely no need for me to contribute to the ever expanding yet dangerously insular field. Some theorists appear to believe that by producing theory about performance they are making theatre. But for me, academics are academics, we do not make theatre (in general) and when we do it is neither victim of nor exposed to the same economic and social constraints as theatre made by "people who make theatre".

We are, to some extent protected. And this protection allows for the remaking of textual maps, the re-weaving of history, the opening up of investigations and for me, adventures into the world of my grandmothers and great-grandmothers, the world of the past and its relation to the present.

### TEXT AS HISTORY/HISTORY AS TEXT

*The past is always changing: history never stays the same. It is constantly revising itself, and when it does, we realise how much things have changed, and how little... Popular history has a habit of typecasting itself. Our century has been neatly divided by the watershed of its wars, conveniently defining and separating social and historical change... history becomes compartmentalised, an instrument of nostalgia.*

Philip Hoare *Wilde's Last Stand*, London, Duckworth, 1997, p. 2

FACT: It is interesting that during the first half of this century, at moments, the percentage of plays by women being produced, in mainstream commercial or "experimental" theatres was as high as 22 %.

FACT: Whilst looking through the archives of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland, a friend of mine noticed that somewhere between 40 - 50% of "tea room" and other parlour plays, submitted as unsolicited scripts from around 1920 to 1950 were by women. No one has actually investigated these texts as far as I am aware.

It is not as if women haven't written plays over the centuries. It is simply that the dominant textures of history have been structured in such a way so as to render those plays either invisible or somehow insignificant.

However, when we expand an idea of text to include autobiographies, testimonials, journalism and diaries for example, we create a very different vision of what women have contributed to theatre over the ages. My recent research for example has been around the work of a British actress and manager, Lena Ashwell.

Ashwell began her professional life as a very successful mainstream actress, worked for the Suffrage theatre, and managed her

own theatre, organised theatre and entertainments for the Allies during the First World War and then ran her own theatre organisation in London, taking theatre to the London suburbs, to venues outside of the then dominant geographical sites for "legitimate" literary theatre. Her career trajectory moved from mainstream stardom to fringe obscurity - the opposite of a normal pattern. She believed that theatre belonged to everyone, that theatre should be part of each citizen's life experience. The longevity of her career is astounding and rarely matched, but there were lots of other women doing similar work, certainly during the early part of this century in Britain.

My point here is that although to some extent the history of theatre has relied heavily on plays as texts, it is also shaped by these "other" texts. Similarly we continue to think of women playwrights as marginal when in fact they have not always been so. It is a kind of nostalgic position - women playwrights were once only marginal, but now they are somehow liberated. We should neither pander to our own fantasies about the innate benefits of marginality nor should we believe the text(ures) of theatre histories which are handed down to us. We have to continue to weave our own. But still, the dominance of text as a defining qualification for inclusion in history is only problematic when the definition of which text/whose text is limited by gender/class/or even aesthetic judgement.

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