

Feminist Theatre;
How It Can Empower Women and Fight Against the Oppression of Women's Bodies

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An Introduction (To Inform the Reader of the Author's Intentions)

Throughout history women have been excluded from many things. To this day women's voices are being unrepresented and even silenced in politics, as well as the arts. It is no secret that most of the people in power in this country, the ones making decisions about the fates of others, are not women. So what are women to do about this? Where can women go to make their voices heard, to share in their experiences, and to produce work that they feel genuinely represents their womanhood, whatever that may mean? The place that has satisfied these criteria for many women is the theatre.

Feminist theatre is an extensive study and theory, and although it is endlessly fascinating, it will not be the entire focus of this paper. Instead I will provide a brief overview of the history and ideas behind feminist theatre and performance, using this as a foundation for discussing specific feminist plays and theatrical creations. These specific plays and the methods which they utilize, as well as the effects they had on the community, are what I am primarily interested in analyzing. This paper will by no means cover the entirety of the vast topic of feminist theatre or all the incredible people who contributed to it. Instead it will focus on specifically selected works which will represent three general categories of feminist theatre which I have framed based on my findings. Those three topics are as follows: collections of related vignettes/monologues, solo-plays, and performance art.

Ultimately my end goal is to discuss the ways in which the works I chose to analyze have affected their audiences and then use this knowledge to inspire my own work of feminist theatre. I want to see the ways in which theatre has been a successful tool in drawing awareness to the

issue of sexism and violence against women and create my own play that will move other women to participate, to speak about their own experiences, and to connect with one another. Lastly, I want to analyze the responses to my work to experience for myself the ways in which theatre is a powerful medium for talking about women's rights issues.

A Brief History of Feminist Theatre

Before the seventeenth century, the woman's role in theatre was essentially nonexistent. Pieces for the stage written by women were scarce, and this created an absence of the female perspective. The nineteenth and twentieth century on the other hand, experienced a significant emergence of women actors and playwrights (Feminism and Theatre, Case). As the twentieth century progressed, so did women's interest in theatre as a form of expression and reform. This is how the feminist theatre movement emerged. Although acting was a viable career for women in the first half of the twentieth century, the reality was that the parts women played did not always represent how they viewed themselves. In the mainstream culture, such as on Broadway, women writers were excluded. Outside of the mainstream, however, they began to flourish. Inspired by the liberating feeling of performance, women began organizing their own theatre companies, writing plays for other women and directing them (Art Versus Business, Chinoy). As America entered the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of women's theatre was growing stronger.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an emergence of female theatre collectives based on the ideals of community. Women joined forces to produce work for themselves and each other. They used

theatre as a means of socializing as well as activism. The WOW Cafe brought lesbian performers together, mostly creating a space for them to entertain one another without inhibitions, while the Women's Experimental Theatre worked to expose and correct the exclusion of women from theatre (Fathom Languages, Dolan). But collective women's theatre was only the first step in the feminist theatre movement.

In the mid-1980s feminist theatre began to shift its focus onto solo performance and performance art. This new form rejected the idea that the women's experience was collective, but instead recognized the differences and individualities of the female performer. Performance art, with its focus on the body's ability to tell a story, diminished the limitations on the performer's expression (Fathom Languages, Dolan). Suddenly feminist theatre became boundless as women's stories took many different shapes and forms on the stage.

Examples of Feminist Theatre

At the heart of the feminist theatre movement are the actual pieces, written and performed by women, that reveal women's stories to the public. These theatrical pieces come in many different forms, but I have created three very broad categories of feminist theatre which I would like to examine.

The first is plays written as a collection of vignettes and monologues. *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler is perhaps one of the most well known pieces of feminist theatre. After interviewing many women because, as she says, she was "worried about vaginas," Ensler wrote a series of monologues which explored how women feel about their vaginas in relation to

how society feels about them. The play covers topics of class, culture, abuse, and misogyny and demonstrates how they all factor into the oppression of women's bodies.

Using real stories, Ensler is able to give voice to an issue which both unites and divides women. As written in the play, "some of the monologues are based on one woman's story, some of the monologues are based on several women's stories surrounding the same theme" (*Vagina Monologues*, Ensler). They cover a range of topics from hair to sex to masturbation. The play ends with a monologue about one woman's newfound sense of pride and appreciation for her vagina.

This style of feminist theatre allows for intimate story telling and the ability for one or multiple women to tell a series of different stories. In this way, plays like *The Vagina Monologues* cover the different perspectives and experiences of women, recognizing how they are individually unique and collectively united.

The next category of feminist theatre that I've found differs in that it follows only one woman's story and can be called the "solo-performance." Deana's Educational Theatre is a company that travels to schools around the country, using theatre to help educate students on the prevention of relationship violence. They produced a play written by Deborah Lake Fortson called *The Yellow Dress*. Instead of spanning across stories and cultures in the way that *The Vagina Monologues* does, this play focuses on one girl's experience. It is a short piece about a girl who was killed by her ex-boyfriend. Written from the first perspective, the girl describes her abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Throughout her monologue she explains that she is going to a school dance to tell her ex-boyfriend's date about what he had done. She tries on

multiple dresses as she speaks, until she ends up in a blood stained yellow dress and it is revealed that she was wearing it when her ex-boyfriend killed her. She has been dead this whole time.

This play is successful in many ways. As it focuses in on one girl's story, the audience is able to recognize the depth of her character and humanize her. The monologue describes the nature of dating violence, providing examples of abusive behavior and recognizing how difficult it can be to leave an abusive relationship. The use of the dress covered in blood creates a striking visual, once again humanizing the victim and using the body to call attention to the issue of violence against women.

The final category of feminist theatre which I will be examining is feminist performance art. This medium differs greatly from the other two in that it allows for the artist to break tradition and create her own forms of expression. Typically feminist performance art focuses on the female body and its ability to tell a story depending on how the artist chooses to portray and use it (Bodies of Evidence, Striff). There are two artists who are well known for creating influential feminist performance art that I will focus on: Karen Finley and Laurie Anderson. The two use different devices in their performances which is representative of the way that performance art is expansive.

Laurie Anderson is best known for using technology and other multimedia tools in her musical performances. She uses technology to enhance her form and sound, creating a cybernetic body through which she can redefine gender roles. Using a vocal harmonizer she both raises and lowers the pitch of her voice. As a cyborg she embodies aspects of masculinity and femininity, thus freeing herself from the confines of either (Bodies of Evidence, Striff). Anderson plays different characters with these voices, noting the ways in which audiences respond differently to

male and female figures. “I wear audio masks in my work... And I do that to avoid the expectations of what it means to be a woman on stage,” explains Anderson. Additionally she presents the fluidity of gender by creating disparities between her voice and her outer appearance by often wearing suits during performances.

Anderson openly acknowledges her use of technology and special effects, and at a time when women were “discouraged from even learning about technology” (Feminine Endings, McClary), this is important to dispel the stereotype. She is able to display the ways in which technology can be used in harmony with the female body. In one performance, for example, she wore a long white dress onto which she had films projected. In this way her body “facilitates the spectacle rather than becoming the fetishised object of that performance” (Bodies of Evidence, Striff). Through her use of technology Anderson comments on the contrast between what is perceived to be a woman and what it truly means to be a woman.

Karen Finley uses her body on stage in a different, but equally intriguing way as Laurie Anderson. Finley is known for using nudity, food, and expressions of grotesqueness and violence in her performance art. She plays victims of rape, abuse, and racism. She criticizes capitalist society and traditional family life openly. Her goal is to sicken and disturb the audience, to elicit an emotional reaction as well as cause them to question authority in our society (Bodies of Evidence, Striff). Daring and forthright, Finley does not hold herself back.

Despite this, it is important to notice the ways in which Finley’s work is problematic. She often speaks of her performances as being representative of women collectively, making certain assumptions and generalizations about the female experience. For instance, she speaks about women’s innate femininity and connection to child-bearing, which ignores the reality that many

women do not identify with such characteristics (Bodies of Evidence, Striff). Although Finley's work is successful in exposing much of the reality of violence against women, she fails to either focus solely on a single experience or represent the diversity of the female experience.

It is clear that there are many different ways for women to express themselves through feminist theatre. Storytelling is powerful, whether it be in the form of a monologue or vignette, a song, a movement, or an image, and this is what feminist theatre aims to do. One woman can tell her story and then empower another woman to speak up, causing a chain reaction. This creates a way for women to join together and connect, but also a way for the broader community to learn about the daily injustices that women face.

The Effects

It is important to look beyond the works that these women have created and performed and examine the effects they have had on society. Ultimately there must be a goal to feminist theatre. These works must strive to educate, to inspire, and to call for action and there is much evidence that they do. I would like to focus on a few specific events which resulted directly from one of the works which I analyzed above: *The Vagina Monologues*.

In a TED talk entitled *Happiness in body and soul*, Eve Ensler explains how her play *The Vagina Monologues* quickly became part of a larger conversation about violence against women all around the world. By first performing the play at numerous different college campuses, the conversation spread, more people became involved, and Ensler began to travel to countries all around the world to connect with women. She created V-Day, an activist movement to stop violence against females globally. Ensler went to Afghanistan to work with a group called the

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. She went to Ghana and met a woman there who organized a V-Day in her community. In her talk, she refers to these people that she meets as “vagina warriors.” These are people who have experienced or witnessed violence against women and have dedicated their lives to preventing violence against other women (TED, Ensler).

Specifically Ensler speaks of a woman named Agnes, who she says truly embodies what a vagina warrior is. As a young girl growing up in Kenya, Agnes was mutilated and circumcised. After this experience she decided that she would dedicate her life to ending this practice. Agnes spent eight years walking through the Rift Valley in East Africa, teaching men, women, and children about the differences between healthy vaginas and mutilated ones. She was able to save 1,500 girls from being mutilated and circumcised through education and by creating a coming-of-age ritual for girls that replaced being cut. Ensler and the other creators of V-Day supported Agnes by providing her with a car and funding. Through this support, Agnes was able to save 4,500 more girls from being cut and open a house of refuge for girls that were being abused (TED, Ensler). And all of this happened because of a play.

My Play

In writing my own play, I wanted to incorporate the powerful techniques of feminist theatre that I had researched about. I chose to write a series of monologues that were based on the stories of women I interviewed and read about, as well as my own experiences as a female. I wanted to capture the ways in which all women are affected by this idea of gender violence so I

wrote each monologue to embody a different perspective, age, and event. One monologue focuses on the ways in which little girls are taught that young boys show their affection by picking on girls, and how damaging this can be to the ways in which we view later relationships. Another monologue explores the difficult reasons for which some women may choose to stay in an abusive relationship, specifically focusing on the romantic, yet destructive idea that a woman's love can "save" a troubled man. From a different perspective, one short monologue displays the ways in which the culture of sports can support ideas of hyper masculinity and dominance in males. To the extent that I felt I could, I represented a variety of different experiences in terms of class, age, gender, and beliefs.

I also incorporated ideas of feminist performance art and the ways in which the body can tell its own story into my show, similarly to how Karen Finley does in her work. Towards the end of the play I used fake blood, which I rubbed on my face while listening to the song "You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman," to create a contrast between the romanticized ideas of relationships and the reality of the dangers of possessive love. The song, seemingly a beautiful proclamation of love, actually expresses a lot of problematic ideas. "I didn't know just what was wrong with me, till your kiss helped me name it," Carole King sings. "Now I'm no longer doubtful of what I'm living for, 'cause if I make you happy I don't need to do more." These lyrics suggest requires this man's love in order to validate her self-worth and that her happiness depends solely on his. These notions of love are ones that we are raised to believe, but rarely do we examine the ways in which they perpetuate violence against women and male dominance. As I was smearing the blood onto my body and listening to the song, I was happy, but after looking into a mirror and being forced to confront the violence, I revealed to the audience the

damage that these unhealthy ideas of love could cause.

Although each monologue and vignette was different, they tied together to create a broader meaning for the audience. Each character which I played had internalized, in some form, the unhealthy and violent ideas of love and relationships which we are taught from a very early age. I used my body, striking images, powerful language, and honesty to reveal this to the audience, but also to empower women. I portrayed a three-dimensional picture of the female experience, humanizing women and their experiences, and validating their responses in the context of our patriarchal society. I did what I have learned to be the goals of feminist theatre: educate, affect, and empower.

The Response

In order to gauge how well I was able to accomplish what I set out to do, I asked audience members to fill out a short feedback form after seeing my performance. The results were inspiring. The form asked audience members to indicate their gender identity, mark whether they personally related to any of the material in the show, mark whether any of the material made them think of something they hadn't previously considered, mark whether they were emotionally moved, describe their favorite part of the performance, and then add any additional comments in the had any.

Reading these feedback sheets affirmed that my play had been impactful. Out of the 50 females which filled out the form, 78% said that they personally related to the show, 92% said they realized something they hadn't previously considered, and 100% marked that they were

emotionally moved. Out of the 21 males which filled out the form, 57% said they personally related, 95% said they realized something new, and 100% said they felt emotionally moved. These statistics were overwhelming positive and showed the ways in which the show educated, affected, and empowered. It also demonstrated how important feminist theatre is for both men and women.

The question which asked audiences to provide their favorite part of the performance, revealed that feminist performance art is a more powerful tool than I had imagined. Many marked that the bloody “Natural Woman” display was their favorite as it was the most visually striking, and left ample room for audiences to be able to deduce their own meaning from it. This feedback inspires me to further explore performance art in my future performances and truly solidifies the idea that feminist theatre is about breaking down barriers between the audience and the performer.

Lastly, the most important response to my play was one that moved and empowered me in a way that I did not expect. Both in person and in writing, I received countless “thank you’s.” After the show people come up to me in tears, expressing their gratitude for what I had done. Both men and women thanked me for my performance, for being brave enough to address the topic of violence against women, and I felt extremely humbled. To know that so many were able to relate to my performance, to feel power and truth in the words that I wrote, I knew that I had used theatre to move people and do something valuable.

A Conclusion

Theatre is powerful. It is expressive and honest, it is bold and unashamed, and it is moving, but most importantly theatre is the telling of stories. Women often keep their stories to themselves, because of the fear of what will happen if they do not. In reality though, it is our stories that have the power to save us. Our voices are important, our experiences are valid, and through theatre we can connect with one another, as well as with the outside world. Through theatre we can make real change happen. We can empower women all around the world and we can save lives. I am a vagina warrior and I believe that by using theatre I can make a difference for all people.

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