Recording Women
A Documentation of Six Theatre Productions

Geraldine Cousin
First Published in 2000, *Recording Women* documents the work of three leading feminist theatre companies, Sphinx Theatre Company, Scarlett Theatre and Foresight Theatre, through a combination of interviews with theatre practitioners and detailed descriptions of productions in performance. Each of the six productions is innovative in content and style.

Scarlett Theatre’s Paper Walls and Foresight Theatre’s Boadicea: The Red-Bellied Queen employ a skillful mixture of text, music, physical performance, humour and seriousness to explore, respectively, domestic abuse and rape (of women and community). Scarlett Theatre’s The Sisters and Sphinx’s Voyage in the Dark adapt existing texts. The sisters is a ritualized re-enactment of Chekhov’s Three Sisters in which only the female characters from the play appear. Voyage in the Dark uses film-noir-like theatrical effects and the insistent rhythms of the tango to evoke the rootlessness and sense of alienation that characterizes Jean Rhys’s novel. Slap (Foursight Theatre) and Goliath (Sphinx) are both one woman shows. Slap, performed by Naomi Cooke, explores images of motherhood, including lesbian motherhood and the concept of virgin birth. Goliath, performed by Nicola McAuliffe, is a dramatization, by Bryony Lavery, of Beatrix Campbell’s powerful study of the 1991 riots in Cardiff, Oxford and Tyneside. This is a must read for scholars and researchers of theatre studies.
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RECORDING WOMEN

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For Erica, Jane, Dorinda and Julia
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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

Franc Chamberlain
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INTRODUCTION

This book grew out of a desire to record events that were trebly subject to the process of erasure. By their very nature these events – theatrical performances – were inherently ephemeral. In addition, the fact that they were performed (a) by small-scale touring companies, and (b) largely by women added to the likelihood of their being soon forgotten. I have called the book *Recording Women* because the majority of practitioners involved in the creation of the performances were women, and the central focus in the productions was to a large degree on the lives of women. This is not however to disregard the important contributions made by men, notably the male actors involved in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Boadicea: The Red-Bellied Queen*, the composers of original music (who were mostly men), Andrzej Sadowski who devised the text of *The Sisters* from Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, and, of course, Chekhov himself.

The six productions that form my subject matter were the work of three women-run theatre companies: Scarlet Theatre (originally the Scarlet Harlets) who are based in Barnet, north London, Foursight Theatre, based in Wolverhampton, and the Sphinx Theatre Company (formerly The Women’s Theatre Group), based in south-east London near the Old Vic Theatre. My reasons for focusing on these three companies derive partly from personal interest, and partly from the fact that each has a proven track record for creating vibrant, innovative work. The Women’s Theatre Group/ Sphinx has been established as a leading feminist company for over twenty years, the brief of the present Artistic Director, Sue Parrish, being ‘to stage dramatic writing by women, either original plays or adaptations’, which ‘in some way’ takes ‘women forward’. Scarlet Theatre and Foursight Theatre (founded respectively in 1981 and 1987) are also well-established companies. Both, in their artistic policy statements, stress the importance they place on the collaborative nature of the work process. Both utilise a mixture of humour and seriousness, and blend physical performance style, music and text in the theatre pieces they create. Foursight Theatre are additionally characterised by their frequent use of women’s biographies as source material. All three companies consciously engage with women-based issues, yet each creates work that is distinctive in style and texture.

In the case of each company I discuss two productions. Scarlet Theatre’s *The Sisters*, an adaptation of Chekhov’s play using only female characters (initially performed on 17 February 1995), is the first to be considered.

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