

Louise Page – A Tribute (1955-2020)

Carina Bartleet

Carina Bartleet lectures in Drama at Oxford Brookes University. She publishes in the areas of feminism, gender, politics and performance and theatre's intersections with science. Her most recent publications include a chapter on climate change theatre for The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science (2020) and the introduction to the new Methuen classics edition of Neoptolemos by Sarah Daniels (forthcoming 2021).

The dramatist Louise Page, who died in May 2020, was a writer of extraordinary prescience, whose placing of women centre stage has anticipated much of playwriting in the present day. Page's plays of the late 1970s and of the 1980s represent a deft and astonishingly beautiful *oeuvre* in their own right, but, considered alongside her later work for the theatre, they form part of corpus of dramas that deserve new attention and reassessment now. Despite protestations that she did not wish to be labelled a 'feminist playwright', her work has drawn the attention of feminist theatre scholars, not least because her work features a wide range of psychologically complex women characters who speak to the condition of women in the late twentieth century and beyond.¹ Furthermore, her plays draw on themes and ideas that are rooted in women's experience, reflected perhaps in her own assessment that:

I often get labelled a feminist playwright, but I'm a feminist everything; a feminist upholsterer; a feminist cook. I take that label away when I write. I'm just a playwright playwright.²

And yet Page was to assert in 1990 that 'almost everything I've ever written has been about the lives of women and the world women inherit'.³

In her influential study, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, Elaine Aston notes that in 'dramatising the subject of breast cancer and mastectomy', Page's *Tissue* (1978) 'keeps the body concealed in order to critique the concept of the perfect female body image'⁴. Furthermore, Aston argues that this decision avoids 'representing Sally (the patient) as a disfigured object of curiosity'⁵. Formally, then, the play intervenes in notions of the gendered gaze much as Sarah Daniels' *Masterpieces* (1983) and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* (1996) do. Whereas Parks' play draws on over-display to draw attention to othering in terms of race and gender, Page's deliberate under-display, as noted by Aston, anticipates Daniels' sustained reworking of the gaze.⁶ What is significant about *Tissue* as a play is that Page's protagonist, Sally, is a young woman in her twenties rather than an older woman. The vignettes of her life as she undergoes her treatment present a subjective experience of disease from the perspective of the patient. Sparingly written to require a cast of three (Sally, Man, Woman), *Tissue* anticipates later plays, including Nell Dunn's 2002 *Cancer Tales* and Margaret Edson's *Wit* from 1995.

In contrast to the tightly-focused meditation on the social and personal aspects of cancer in *Tissue*, *Salonika* and *Real Estate* both explore mother-daughter relationships and, specifically, the kinds of complicated intergenerational conflict that occur between mothers and daughters who do not share the same outlook or goals. In each play the common theme of happiness for one generation at the expense of the other is explored. *Salonika* places its central characters on a personal pilgrimage to the Greek port of Salonika, part of the Macedonian front during World War I, where the mother's husband died. It is her happiness at the expense of the now aging daughter (who cares for her at the cost of her lack of family) that forms the emotional core of this play, as the women stay in Salonika retracing the last moments of the father. *Real Estate* concerns a successful estate agent,

Gwen, who runs her own company, and her estranged daughter who returns after years out of contact, now with a partner and pregnant with her own child. Both plays document the social changes for women during the twentieth century. *Real Estate* is about a mother and daughter relationship but it's also about the property market and running a business versus the kinds of self-sacrificial feelings that women are taught they ought to feel for their children, but don't necessarily.

Golden Girls (1984) is topical and provocative in its handling of theme of women athletes and doping in competitive sports. A celebration of women's sporting achievements and their struggle to be taken seriously is set against a backdrop of commercial sponsorship from Golden Girls shampoo and an increasing professionalisation of sport. The play documents the women's running team as they prepare and compete together for the British Relay team in the build-up to the Olympic games. In her book *Carry On Understudies* (1986), Michelene Wandor stated that the play is focused on 'the competitive instinct and the desire to "win" in the women and the men'.⁷ Perhaps it is this fascination with the desire to win regardless of gender which makes this play so significant. It is equally if not more important that, in the 1970s and 1980s, Louise Page's prominence was a significant encouragement to other playwrights, to believe that they too could succeed.

Golden Girls anticipates Regan Hall's successful 2012 film *Fast Girls*, scripted by Roy Williams, Noel Clarke and Jay Basu, which also focuses on women in athletics.⁸ With its themes of women's unequal treatment in sport, exploration of the dilemmas and pressures of mixing first class competitive sport with having a personal life, and sub plots of racism in media and advertising, doping scandals and sport psychology, *Golden Girls* feels more like a play for the twenty-first century than the 1980s.

Reading Page's work now, I am struck by how timely it is and yet how neglected her *oeuvre* has been. Locked into a second-wave feminist moment, it is as if the world stopped, frozen at that mid-1980s crossroads between class and identity politics, even though some of her later work, like *Diplomatic Wives* (1989), explores how women navigate career and ambition. Although she was a very prolific writer, many of Page's plays are yet to be published. Page's work for radio, however, is well known. Working with producer Vanessa Whitburn, she wrote for the long-running soap opera *The Archers* on BBC Radio 4. She and Whitburn also worked together on a number of radio dramas, including *Armistice* (1983), *Housewives* (BBC radio 3, 1981 and later staged), *Working Out* (BBC radio 4, 1988) and *Angus Dei* (BBC Radio 4, 1980). *Tissue* also received a BBC radio 3 outing produced by Whitburn.⁹

Page's other writing includes some literary adaptations, including an as-yet-unproduced adaptation of William Wilkie Collins's *No Name, Love from a Stranger* (2010) adapted from an Agatha Christie tale, Alessandro Mazoni's *The Betrothed* (1992), and, for radio, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1991). Her writing for television includes hit series such as *Bad Girls* (1999-2006), as well as singly authored, original dramas including *Peanuts* (Granada Television, 1988) and the wonderfully titled pun-on-a-Thomas Mann novella, *DIY in Venice* (Central, 1982). She also continued to write for the stage well beyond the late 1980s. Her later plays include *Beauty and the Beast* (1985), *Hawks and Doves* (1993), *Another Nine Months* (1995) and *A Serious Joke* (2004).

Shaken, Page's play about Parkinson's Disease, was co-authored with her writer partner, Chris Hawes, who died a few months after her in October 2020. Given a reading by RADA students, the play is a return to the kind of personal, small cast but emotionally grand writing that is a feature of *Tissue*. It charts the progression of Hawes's Parkinson's Disease

from initial symptoms, to diagnosis and beyond as the disease progresses. Like *Tissue*, *Shaken* takes as its topic our unease with disease and, specifically, the experiences of a couple as Parkinson's takes over their relationship. The play is written in twelve short scenes for two characters only (Chris and Louise), with internal first and third person characters played by the same actors; it presents an episodic account of their lives as Chris comes to terms with his illness and Louise with the fact that she must juggle daily caring responsibilities for her partner alongside both of their desires to keep working. At times, *Shaken* is brutal in its depiction of Parkinson's as the disease takes its toll on Chris and on the couple's relationship and their writing careers but it is remarkable in its beauty and tenderness too.

Like *Tissue* before it, *Shaken* draws on a deliberate under-display of disease by the characters, as Chris and Louise work to conceal its outward symptoms, while inwardly and privately the couple work very hard to manage them. In Scene 4, Chris discusses how he manages his some of the symptoms as the disease progresses:

His mouth begins to take on a life of its own. He can hear his teeth chattering.

HE DEMONSTRATES

There's a tremor he can control through clenching his teeth. Making his face rigid until the shaking passes. To Parkinson's insiders this is known as 'The Mask.'

HE TAKES OUT A BOTTLE OF MADOPAR

The other tremor responds quite well to the medication.¹⁰

Here the under-display becomes an unveiling: a careful unmasking of 'The Mask'. In Page and Hawes' hands, under-display is a dramatic tool for presenting a social gest about the illness and our own complicity in concealing outward signs of disease. Here, too, are

elements shared with *Golden Girls*, *Real Estate* and *Salonika*: the difficult choices women must make between caring and career, ambition, and family.

Page's writing anticipates many of the complex concerns of theatre today in her sophisticated exploration of gender, emotion and ambition. Retrospectively, *Shaken* and *Tissue*, with their common theme of the fragilities of existence and the social and personal costs of disease, provide a metaphorical frame for the other plays.

I want to thank Caroline Sharman and Brigid Lamour for making available to me some of Louise's unpublished works. Louise's Plays One (*Tissue*, *Salonika*, *Real Estate* and *Golden Girls*) is published by Methuen, and *Diplomatic Wives* as a single volume. All are now available on Drama Online.

Works Cited

Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Gabriele Griffin, 'Mrs Worthington's Daughters: Drama,' *The History of British Women's Writing, 1970-Present*. Eds. Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Page, Louise. *Plays: One*. (London: Methuen, 1992).

Page, Louise, "Emotion Is a Theatrical Weapon." *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 22, 1990, pp. 174–182., doi:10.1017/S0266464X00004243.

Page, Louise. 'The 5-minute Interview: Louise Page, Playwright,' *The Independent* 17 January 2008. Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/the-5-minute-interview-louise-page-playwright-770627.html> (accessed 29 November 2020).

Page, Louise and Hawes, Chris, *Shaken* (n.d.). unpublished MS.

Pinnock, Winsome. [IN THIS ISSUE - Insert title and issue details]

Sakellaridou, Elizabeth. "NTQ Checklist No. 6: Louise Page." *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 22, 1990, pp. 183–187., doi:10.1017/S0266464X00004255.

Thorpe, Vanessa. Fast Girls: how the Olympics dream inspired 'the new Chariots of Fire', *The Observer* 27 May 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/27/fast-girls-crichlow-chariots-fire> (accessed 2 December 2020).

Michelene Wandor, *Carry On Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

¹ Louise Page, 'The 5-minute Interview: Louise Page, Playwright,' *The Independent* 17 January 2008. Available: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/the-5-minute-interview-louise-page-playwright-770627.html> (accessed 29 November 2020).

² Page, 2008.

³ Louise Page, "Emotion Is a Theatrical Weapon." *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 22, 1990, pp. 174–182., doi:10.1017/S0266464X00004243. 177.

⁴ Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995) 96.

⁵ Aston, 96.

⁶ Aston, 94-5.

⁷ Michelene Wandor, *Carry On Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) 180.

⁸ Vanessa Thorpe, Fast Girls: how the Olympics dream inspired 'the new Chariots of Fire', *The Observer* 27 May 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/27/fast-girls-crichlow-chariots-fire> (accessed 2 December 2020).

⁹ Gabriele Griffin, 'Mrs Worthington's Daughters: Drama,' *The History of British Women's Writing, 1970-Present*. Eds. Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 54.

¹⁰ Louise Page and Chris Hawes, *Shaken* unpublished MS. Scene 4.