The Ladies
A TEXT ABOUT GIRLS, AND THEIR FIERCE LITTLE FANTASIES

By Anne Washburn

Presented by QUT Precincts and the Creative Industries Faculty
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**QUT 2019 Showcase Productions**

QUT acting students’ showcase season provides an enriching and intimate learning opportunity for senior students studying Drama, Theatre Studies or English in Years 10 – 12.
CAST AND CREATIVE

**Creative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playwright</td>
<td>Anne Washburn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Andrea Moor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lighting Designer</td>
<td>Glenn Hughes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set and Costume designer</td>
<td>Raymond Milner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision designer</td>
<td>Callie Roebuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound designer</td>
<td>Dominic Guilfoyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production Stage Manager</td>
<td>Nicholas Seery</td>
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**Cast**

**Estimated running time:**

**Recommended**

- Grade 10-12

**Warnings**

- Discussions of faith and philosophy

**Themes of the production**

- Women and power, politics
Subject Matter (aligning to 2019 Drama Syllabus)

Purpose
To challenge, To document,
To empower, To entertain

Dramatic Style
Post-dramatic theatre
Non-Realism
Verbatim theatre

Dramatic structure
Episodic, non-linear structure

Conventions
Minimalist setting, with suggestive props and staging
Episodic structure
Non-linear structure
Multiple role
Self vs. character
Transformations of role, place, space and time
Symbolic use of music
Intertextual references
Use of humour
Transcribed dialogue
Interweaving of pre-recorded and live dialogue
Meta-theatrical devices (eg. Self vs character,
Director as voice in performance, Writer as voice in performance)
Anne Washburn explains the impetus for writing *The Ladies*:

Anne K (director Anne Kauffman) became interested in developing a piece on dictators’ wives in 2000 after directing a production of Mad Forest, Caryl Churchill’s play about the Romanian revolution, and working as assistant director on Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters – a play about the Philippines. The first play she ever saw was *Evita*... so she contemplated the connections, added Madame Mao and approached me.

(Writers notes to *The Ladies*, p107)

I too had directed a production of Churchill’s Mad Forest, and had seen David Byrne’s Imelda Marcos-inspired musical *Here Lies Love* at the National Theatre London in 2014. I was also fascinated by the audacity of women in questionable positions of power.

*The Ladies* offered our cast an opportunity to explore multiple characters, question the complexities of these powerful women, and to unravel the puzzle that is the making of the play. Almost every character in the play is based on an historical or living person, allowing for detailed observation in character building. It has been a joy to work with our third-year women in what is a powerhouse ensemble of emerging artists. Our production team of QUT technical production students have been nothing short of brilliant and we are indebted to their good humour and resourcefulness. We hope that you enjoy exploring the lives of Mao’s dog, the spiritual leader of Argentina, the mother of Romania, and the amply-heeled first lady of the Philippines.
Anne K (Anne Kaufman) became interested in the idea of developing a piece on dictators' wives in 2000 after directing Mad Forest, Caryl Churchill's play about the Romanian Revolution and working as an assistant director on Jessica Hagedorn's Dogeaters- a play about the Philippines. The first Broadway show she ever saw was Evita... so she contemplated the connections, added Madame Mao, and approached me. These were all women with a strong sense of the theatrical—all of them with the exception of Elena has a past, however chequered, in the performing arts, (and you could argue that Elena, who managed with a 4th grade education to pass herself off as an eminent scientist, was nicely in touch with her fantasy life). We were intrigued, inspired, and troubled by their confidence and their ferocity.

We checked out books from the library and settled into the research stage, that wonderful period during which—in contrast to the murky processes of writing and rehearsing—you feel competent and intellectual and cozy. We planned to read as much as possible and to meet periodically for discussions which would help to inform the writing of the play. It was important of course that we have good notes on these important conversations and I suggested we record them. In the meantime I beginning to write. Faced with a deadline for a residency, and not enough material, I suggested that we transcribe the tapes and see if there was anything particularly brilliant which could inspire me. It's a sobering exercise, seeing your own conversations laid out or you in black and white. We were fascinated by the clumsy humanness of the dialogues in the transcripts, and the alternate anti-grammars which lie at the heart of colloquial speech. Introducing ourselves as characters opened up the dramaturgy of the play.

We began a series of workshops with the actresses in which we gave them in no way enough time to look at very condensed (but still too long to absorb) write ups on the women's lives, and then gave them a very limited period of time to retell the information. The results were sprightly, and we used recordings of these sessions in the production as exposition. The tone of these sessions also gave license to a certain strain of girlish hilarity which runs through the work.
by Raymond Milner

Set and Costume

As a scenic designer (Set and Costume) it is my responsibility to conceive and develop the visual world of a play on stage. The brief for QUT’s Season of Contemporary American Plays was to create a single design that fit both The Ladies by Anne Washburn and Sons of the Prophet by Stephen Karam.

The Ladies is an episodic, non-linear piece that uses historical female figures to comment on power. The play includes many nondescript locations and spans a wide timeline. Sons of the Prophet on the other hand uses a conventional structure with a linear narrative taking place over six months in only a handful of locations which would be familiar to audience members including a house, office, hospital and bus station.

When designing a space for two plays with considerably different performance styles I first had to study the plays to find a common thread.

The first step in conceiving a design for these two plays came from the plays themselves. Karam at the beginning of the play describes the space as “spare” and that “the various locales should suggest human spaces, but not be burdened by realistic details.” Similarly Washburn also uses the word spare; “Staging is as mobile and spare as possible, with minimal props.” Following from this I looked closely at the historical time periods of the plays. The Ladies spans a time of great social and political change around the world. Sons of the Prophet also takes place in a time of great change, however the changes are personal. Both plays showcase themes of pain both physically and emotionally.

Sons of the Prophet is set in a working class town where the steel mill, a once flourishing industry, has closed and been left to decay and a family marked by tragedy must overcome their pain. Using this visual metaphor I designed a two level “island” which draws on the notion of decay through the use of texture and the box like architecture that is found in brutalism.

The set splits the acting area into 5 sections, two on the upper level, two on the lower level and one at stage level. This allows for seamless transitions from scene to scene without breaking rhythm. The design also permits lighting to play a large role in setting time and place, directing the audience focus to the relevant stage area.

Costume plays a large role in reinforcing the narrative. Karam’s descriptions of each character whether direct or indirect, were to develop a personal style for each character. In addition to research of the time, place and social norms of each character.

I hope the design provides an environment that both engages the audience and provides a space which serves both plays well.
SET DESIGN

Initial set design sketch for *The Ladies and Sons of the Prophet.*
COSTUME DESIGN

Initial costume designs for *The Ladies.*
The Ladies

The Ladies is a complex and challenging play construction. It defies the dramatic tradition of narrative and, moves between episodes of varying dramatic inheritance from Chinese Opera, Verbatim, song, pre-recorded voice overs and scenes with emotional authenticity. The dramatic form of this production sits within the post-dramatic field.

What is Post-Dramatic Theatre?

The term ‘Postdramatic Theatre’, which has become an increasingly important one since the publication of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s book Postdramatic Theatre (German 1999; English translation 2006), covers a wide range of contemporary theatrical forms, including devised work and live art. When considered in terms of plays, postdramatic theatre more specifically registers a dissatisfaction with drama’s two fundamental processes: the representation of the external world and the structuring of time. To take each in turn: representation is, by definition, selective and subjective. Playwrights have to choose what they include in their dramas and this choice is necessarily made through the blinkers of their own perspectives. Time in drama is also always structured: without this type of organization, there would be no tension and no sense of progression from a play’s beginning to its middle and its end.

[...]

Postdramatic plays differentiate themselves from representational theatre by offering actors and audiences theatrical experiences that are not tied to the vicissitudes of either character or plot but seek to investigate broader issues, free of drama’s limitations. Clearly, postdramatic plays ask much of performers who are no longer so much concerned with depicting people, action and places than assuming the role of ‘text bearer’. A further implication of the postdramatic paradigm shift is a greater integration of the audience into the meaning-making process. The orientation provided by recognizable characters or plotlines dissolves, and spectators have to negotiate the production of postdramatic plays by working through a new set of conventions. These tend to be connected with a movement away from interpretation of the play on stage to the presentation of linguistic and gestural material. The stage becomes a generator of shared experiences rather than knowledge, and spectators are confronted with the question of how they deal with such phenomena.

by Dr David Barnett, Reader in Drama, Theatre and Performance, University of Sussex

Source: https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/post-dramatic-theatre-iid-2516
Where in the production can I see evidence of the post-dramatic form?

Conventions:

- The play weaves recordings of the director and playwright speaking into the production.
- The text spoken by the actors is revealed as improvised by the original actors who workshopped this play.

This metatheatrical convention is constant reminder about the construction of the play and more so about the subjectivities injected into the depiction of events and character. It serves as a reminder to the audience that as the creatives have overlaid their viewpoints and assumptions, so will the audience as they interact with this production.

Anne Washburn has included verbatim conversations that she had with director Anne Kauffman throughout the workshopping of the play. These conversations are played out by our actors who represent the original actors in the workshop, playing the director and the writer. The other four actors play the original American actors and also the roles that those actors played: Imelda Marcos, Elena Ceausescu, Eva Peron and Madam Mao. So the play weaves between verbatim director/writer chats, actors in the creative development of the play, actors improvising the play content and the actors performing the final performance.

Andrea Moor

Conventions:

- Multiple role
- Transition between real and fictional contexts

The actors transition between the characters of the ‘ladies’ and the actors who originally workshopped the text. This conventions dispels any illusion of reality. We see these transitions and are constantly reminded of the mechanics of performance and the subjectivities performance making.

This production has asked us to clearly divide each time and place, moving swiftly from one character to another. It is a great challenge for the actors.

Andrea Moor

Conventions:

- Playwright has specified that the director must be female and cast should be all female

This convention has created a silence in the text (male voice) and through this decision has illuminated the unique perspectives and political position of women in the play and as theatre makers.
**Conventions:**

- Director speaks in the production

This convention is a meta-theatrical convention once again reminding us of the often silent influence of the director. This adds yet another reminder and layer of the subjectivities injected into the text.

> And to make things even more complex Washburn has asked the direct of the play, who must be female, to play the director and speak into the piece.

Andrea Moor

**Conventions:**

- Minimalist staging
- Use of AV to project scene titles

Jointly these production elements allow the text to transition from episode to episode. The use of AV and space is not linked to place or time in the theatrical tradition, but used to demarcate episodes and the exploration of new ideas.

> The space is empty with a strong reliance on sound and lighting with some AV.

Andrea Moor

**Conventions:**

- Multiple styles or dramatic inheritances utilised in episodes
- Non-realism
- Episodic

The production manifests through episodes that do not adhere to an illusion of reality or narrative cohesion. The episodes depict a range of stylistic inheritances from Chinese Opera, song, dance and emotional authentic scenes. Through these contrasting dramatic styles we are reminded of the subjective treatment of the characters and construction of the production.

> The style in naturalistic and yet at times we are able to enter high drama, Chinese model opera, song and dance.

Andrea Moor
Verbatim Theatre

Throughout the play, recordings of conversations between the playwright and director, and the actors workshopping the play are interweaved into the text. The transcribed is an injection of the authentic voice through the dramatic style of Verbatim.

What is Verbatim Theatre?

The Verbatim Theatre style sits inside the documentary theatre form, and its plays are constructed from the words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic.

“After the interviews are completed, the playwright weaves together the different interviews to build a dramatic script. This form of theatre brings together different stories that create a dialogue that is personal and powerful. The intimacy which verbatim theatre creates allows the audience to experience the characters as if they are speaking directly to them.”

http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/terrorists/verbatim

In its purest and strictest form, Verbatim Theatre is “predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. The primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place.” (Paget 1987: 317).

The style has morphed over time and now the style is less rigid and can be drawn from a wide range of different research strategies (court transcripts, diaries, online blogs, etc.). Further, some Verbatim texts now integrate media footage, court transcripts, short scenes recreating events as they were recollected by the interviewees and creating characters/dialogue from composites of transcripts.

Getting to know The Ladies

The ladies featured in this work are described by the playwright (Anne Washburn) as “women with a strong sense of the theatrical”. When combined with the all female cast and creative team, the theatrical links are further enhanced. The depiction of the characters of this play are viewed through the subjective re-telling of their stories by actors.

We began a series of workshops with the actresses in which we gave them in no way enough time to look at very condensed (but still too long to absorb) write ups on the women’s lives, and then gave them a very limited period of time to retell the information.

(Anne Washburn)

Below is a summary of some research about each of the women.

Jiang Qing (1914–1991)

Jiang Qing was a Chinese politician famous as a leader of the Cultural Revolution from 1966–1968. She was third wife of Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong. She acquired far-reaching powers over China’s cultural life and oversaw the total suppression of a wide variety of traditional Chinese cultural activities through her leadership of the Red Guard. She replaced nearly all earlier works of art with revolutionary Maoist works. Jiang Qing was considered the most influential woman in the People’s Republic of China until her downfall in 1976, after Mao’s death. In 1981 she was convicted of “counter-revolutionary crimes” and imprisoned as a member of the Gang of Four.

Jiang Qing studies literature and drama at university and spent some time as an actress.

Eva Perón (1919–1952)

Eva Perón was second wife of Argentine president Juan Perón, The Peróns were revered by the working class. Eva was known as the de facto minister of health and labour, awarding generous wage increases to the unions. She notably cut off government subsidies to the traditional Sociedad de Beneficencia (Spanish: “Aid Society”), and replaced it with her own Eva Perón Foundation. These resources were used to establish thousands of hospitals, schools, orphanages, homes for the aged, and other charitable institutions.

Before she married Juan Perón, Eva worked as an actor primarily on radio.
Imelda Marcos (1929- )

Imelda Marcos was a public figure in the Philippines who wielded great power during the 20-year rule of her husband, Pres. Ferdinand Marcos. She also held congressional seats in the Philippines despite being dogged by numerous charges for corruption. Imelda was known as the “Steel Butterfly” for her combination of fashion sense and political grit.

Prior to marrying her husband she was a beauty queen.

Elena Ceaușescu (1916-1989)

Elena Ceaușescu was a member of the Romanian Communist Party where she met her husband; Nicolae Ceaușescu. Nicolae went on to be

Elena held various offices at senior levels in the Romanian Communist Party. She was known as “Mother of the Nation” during the height of their power. During the Romanian Revolution, she and her husband fled only to be captured and executed by firing squad.

Elena falsely claimed to be a scientist despite only acquiring an elementary school education. Her commitment to her fictional narrative as a scientist saw her awarded a PhD in chemistry. After her death several scientists have claimed that Ceaușescu had forced them to write papers in her name.
Responding Activity 1

_The Ladies_ can be described as non-realist. How does the production ensure that the audience is not fooled into believing the text is based in reality?

Responding Activity 2

_The Ladies_ is a demanding work for the actors. Discuss how effectively the convention of multiple role has been used by the actors.

Responding Activity 3

Post-dramatic theatre does not rely on narrative to communicate meaning. What dramatic meaning did you take away from the text and how was this communicated.

*Note: When responding, always refer to a range of dramatic languages including dramatic conventions, skills of drama and elements of drama.*