

More Great Women: Re-imagining *A Pageant of Great Women* for the present day

by Clare Neylon

Presented at the Sibeal Conference, University of Limerick, Ireland

on November 21st 2015

During the women's suffrage campaign in Britain in the early 1900s, many and varied reasons were cited by anti-suffragist campaigners as to why women did not deserve the vote. These included the fact that women belonged in the home, not the public sphere of politics, that they did not serve their country as soldiers, therefore deserved no say in politics or the running of the country, that they were too emotional to make political judgments and that they essentially had a vote already through their male family members. This final argument was offered with particular reference to husbands, over whom women were believed to be able to wield their feminine charms in order to convince them to vote as they, their wives, wished. Although women were occasionally involved in politics and indeed campaigned and canvassed for particular parties and candidates, despite being unable to vote themselves, offering the ability to influence their husbands as a reason for depriving women of a vote of their own was unfair and unreasonable. Many of these anti-suffrage arguments were ridiculed and questioned in the texts of the suffrage theatre by writers such as Cicely Hamilton, Evelyn Glover and Inez Bensusan who presented their arguments in favour of women's suffrage and offered convincing counter-arguments to those presented by anti-suffrage commentators. One such example is in the comic play *How the Vote was Won* (1909), in which the women of England descend on their nearest male relative 'all with the same story, 'I've come to be supported'' (Hamilton & St. John, 1909, p.3). The play ends with Horace, the man of the family, rushing out to campaign for

women's suffrage once he realises the burden he would have to bear if he were to really support and speak for all of his nearest female in-laws. The play is comic and slightly farcical, but presents a means of mass protest by women that was echoed in both the strikes by women workers in Ford, Dagenham in 1968 for pay equality and the mass strike in Iceland in 1975 where an estimated ninety percent of women refused to go to work or attend to their domestic chores for a full day in protest at low pay and the lack of acknowledgement for women's work in society (Rudolfsdottir, 2005). The ending of the play is positive and upbeat, the women succeed in their mission and the anti-suffrage men see the error of their ways. This positive ending is typical of much of the pro-suffrage writing from the era, as will be discussed later.

This paper will present *More Great Women*, an interactive performance, which drew on the suffrage play *A Pageant of Great Women* by Cicely Hamilton, as well as writing by Elizabeth Robins, and was performed at the Pankhurst Centre in Manchester as part of the Wonder Women festival in March 2015. It will provide some background information on the original play and will examine the aims of the 2015 piece, its achievements and limitations. It will further question the progress made by women over the last century in terms of equality of representation, specifically in the workplace. The spheres of arts and science will be particularly examined in this paper and finally, I will argue that the presence of more visible female role-models in these fields would encourage participation and confidence in young women and girls hoping to make careers in these different areas. It should be noted at this point that the term 'role-model' is used in this paper to mean a woman who has achieved success in her chosen career and could provide a visible sign to women in the same field of what can be achieved. It does not in any way encompass

the moral or ethical values of the particular women presented. All of the women represented in the project were suggested by members of the public, and, without exception these suggestions were used in the performance piece in order to aid inclusivity and diversity. The usefulness of this method of collecting the female role models used in the piece will also be discussed briefly in the paper.

A Pageant of Great Women was another of the suffrage plays that aimed to protest anti-suffrage arguments and provide evidence of women's suitability to vote and participate in politics. Hamilton was responding to the argument that women had never contributed positively to battles, history, literature and the arts, meaning they had not earned the right to decide on the political future of their country. In direct response to what she perceived as a totally unfair analysis of women's contribution to society, history and culture, Hamilton wrote *A Pageant of Great Women*, which was staged in 1912 at the Scala theatre in London, directed by Edith Craig. The play involves a conversation between the characters Justice, Woman and Prejudice, in which Woman introduces a large number of important women from history in order to convince Justice that she has served society throughout history and deserves her freedom. Her freedom in this case, involves the power to run her own life and affairs and, we can assume, the right to vote. The women are introduced and come on stage in groups divided into Learned Women, Artists, Saints, Heroines, Queens and Warriors. The women are briefly introduced, but the true message of the piece lies in their amassing on the stage overwhelming, through the sheer power of numbers, the argument that women have contributed little to society and history. The multitude of characters gather 'on stage, silently building up a powerful, visual body of evidence in the debate on women's enfranchisement.' (Cockin, 2005, p. 527). The ending of this

play is again hopeful and positive with woman winning her freedom and declaring that she is ‘feeling the riot and rush of crowding hopes, dreams and vehement powers and knowing this-tis good to be alive when morning dawns’ (Hamilton, 1912, p.22). This typifies the excitement and positivity with which women playwrights and writers of the time expressed a future where women were enfranchised and controlled their own fates.

A Pageant of Great Women was successfully revived in 2011 in a touring production, directed by Anna Birch in collaboration with the University of Hull, which aimed to involve women from community groups in different cities in the UK. The production toured the UK and culminated in Glasgow with a large public procession. Due to this recent revival of the piece itself and a desire to present women from the last century since the play was written, I did not wish to stage the play, but rather to re-imagine this pageant, taking into account women from the last hundred years who would naturally not have been acknowledged in the original. The idea began as a performance piece for the Wonder Women festival in Manchester, celebrating women’s history in the century since women first received the vote in Britain. I developed a site-specific interactive performance, which was staged in the Pankhurst Centre, the former home of Emmeline Pankhurst and her family. The initial aim of the piece was to recreate the feeling that Cockin described of a powerful body of visual evidence, through projecting a series of women’s faces categorised into groups that would correspond to those in *A Pageant of Great Women*. This was accompanied by a performance of the speech that Elizabeth Robins, the noted suffrage writer, delivered at the Criterion in London on May 23rd 1910. Her positive, and perhaps naïve, view that women writers were now free to write their stories, presenting woman’s

perspective on the world, jars with the experience of women working the arts today, where creative and decision-making roles are still filled by a majority of men. I hoped that the juxtaposition of this passionate and positive speech from over a century ago, with the reality of the lack of women in prominent positions that persists in society today would be a kind of call to action to improve the situation. This would be in addition to illustrating the already large body of women working successfully in many fields, despite their lack of visibility in comparison to men in similar positions.

Some adaptation of the original groups in *A Pageant of Great Women* was made in order to give maximum visibility to important women's roles from the last century. Saints became Scientists, as the contribution of women to science, engineering and technology had only been given passing reference in the original, along with cultural shifts in the intervening century meaning that saints would be less prominent and arguably less respected in the present day. Additionally, the category of Queens became Leaders, this decision was made on the grounds that queens could still be present in this category, but of course at that time women could not be elected to parliament and therefore a category such as leaders in the political sense would have been impossible. The women in the projections were not named in order that their power came simply from the volume of their presence and not the specifics of who they were. However, for those who wanted to follow up on this, a blog posting listing the women in their categories was made available to all who attended the performance. This will later be accompanied by an archive of the women with summaries of their contributions to the past century. This information is currently being collated and logged and will form the next stages of the research.

As mentioned previously, to encourage inclusivity and in an attempt to have a wide range of women featured, an open call was put out on social media, asking for suggestions for women to be included in the piece. This resulted in the inclusion of women from around the world, from various backgrounds and fields, many of whom I would not have known to include myself. This, in turn, led to some in-depth research on my part and a more even spread of women from different ethnic backgrounds and fields than I would have achieved on my own. Although there was a range of women in the projections, this is an area that could have been improved on with regards to representation. A recognition of women, who have historically been particularly marginalised, those outside of the able-bodied, white, heterosexual grouping, would have strengthened the piece. The performance did not feature any paralympians or LGBTQ leaders for example and this is something that I will take into consideration for future incarnations of *More Great Women*. Collaboration with specific community and women's groups is planned and should add to the range of women selected and deepen the involvement of ordinary women in creating a powerful presence of successful women on screen.

Alongside the projections of women's faces within their different categories, the performance also involved an actress in Edwardian dress performing part of the speech Elizabeth Robins delivered at the Criterion in 1910. This speech is full of hope as she urges her fellow writers to take this opportunity to write women's stories saying:

‘Fellow members of the League, you have such a field as never writers had before. An almost virgin field. You are, in respect of life described fearlessly from the woman's standpoint--you are in that position for which Chaucer has

been so envied by his brother poets, when they say he found the English language with the dew upon it. You find woman at the dawn.’ (Robins, 1910, p. 250)

She encouraged the women to write true portraits of their fellow woman who was as she phrased it ‘a creature of infinite variety, of curiosities and ambitions, of joy in physical action, of high dreams of love and service’ (Robins, 1910, p.250) as opposed to what she deemed the limited female characters provided so far by male writers. She ends by saying:

‘The Great Adventure is before her. *Your* Great Adventure is to report her faithfully. So that her children's children reading her story shall be lifted up--proud and full of hope’. (Robins, 1910, p. 251)

Two interesting elements of the same issue emerge from this speech with regards to the scope of this paper. The first is the idea that women have a ‘virgin field’ to write about and the second is the reference to the belief in a great future for women, where they would control their own destinies and write their own stories. It could be argued that over one hundred years later, this field, if not quite virginal, is still almost untouched. Particularly in the realms of theatre and film, the writing of women has seen minimal representation over the last century. With current debates raging about the Abbey, the national theatre of Ireland, and the lack of female writers and directors in their 2016 programme and wider debates in the British film and theatre industries as well as American cinema, it is becoming increasingly clear that women are extremely under-represented in these fields. A similar trend can be observed in the field of science and technology, where women occupy approximately thirteen percent of STEM roles in the UK (Black, 2015) and a lower percentage of leadership roles.

Speaking on September 14th in Salford, Professor Dame Carol Black, Principal of Newnham college at Cambridge University and former president of the Royal College of Physicians proposed that the low number of women in key positions within STEM areas could be due to a lack of confidence on the part of the women. There are clearly many other factors that need to be addressed when searching for solutions to the dearth of women in any sector, such as conscious and unconscious bias, lack of childcare provision and a particular scrutiny for women in management positions (Wajcman, 1998). However, taking for the moment, Professor Black's point about confidence, I would argue that the lack of visible role models in the field and particularly in high level positions, contributes to this lack of confidence as girls and young women, unable to see other women occupying these positions find it difficult to imagine themselves there. One of the aims of the performance then is to write women back into history, to show their achievements in literature, theatre, arts, media and science among other areas and to present such a wide and large 'procession' of women that they can no longer be ignored or sidelined.

Although new work is important in achieving equality of representation and must be supported, it is not the only source. My own research involves examining the archive of women's work and responding to it or re-interpreting it, but there are many others doing this kind of work and many more archives to be uncovered and publicly claimed. An investigation of the writing women have already done would lead to a wealth of women's work and greater acknowledgement of the stories that they want to tell. One such researcher looking into the Irish theatre archives is Dr. Velma O'Donaghue who has conducted in-depth research into Geraldine Cummings and

Suzanne Day, two writers who wrote for the Abbey in the early 1900s. These suffragist, social-minded women co-wrote three peasant plays for the Abbey, two of which, 'Broken Faith' (1913) and 'Fox and Geese' (1917), were produced & well received by audiences. Dr. Melissa Sihra, writing recently in the Irish Times noted that in her research, she had 'identified over 600 plays by Irish women since 1663, many of which are from the 20th century'. (2015)

An active examination of the archive such as Dr. O'Donaghue and Dr. Sihra have carried out in Ireland, and as researchers such as Dr. Susan Croft and Professor Vivien Gardner have carried out in relation to suffrage theatre in the UK, could help to fill out our history and provide not only knowledge and examples of women's writing, but also a wealth of female characters, plays about women and a new canon of writing to be appreciated and accessed. In addition the acknowledgment of the contributions women have made in the arts, sciences and many other areas would lead to clearer visible role models and I would argue, thus higher participation by women in these types of roles. Despite the aforementioned weaknesses in the performance, with regards to wider inclusion of women from all sectors of society, *More Great Women* brought to the fore some of the important women from the last century and provided a level of visibility for these women, so that they might be remembered and provide inspiration to those wishing to see someone who reflects them in the position they aspire to hold.

Reference List:

- A Pageant of Great Women*, 2012. [DVD] Anna Birch, UK: University of Hull.
- Black, C. 2015. *Women in Science: Propensities and Choices*. 14 September, Old Fire Station, Salford.
- Cockin, K. 2005. Cicely Hamilton's warriors: dramatic reinventions of militancy in the British women's suffrage movement. *Women's History Review*. [Online]. 14 (3-4), pp. 527-542. [Accessed 20 October 2015]. Available from: <http://www-tandfonline-com.salford.idm.oclc.org/doi/abs/10.1080/09612020500200437>
- Hamilton, C. *A Pageant of Great Women*. 1910. The Suffrage Shop, London.
- Hamilton, C. & St. John, C. *How the Vote was Won*. 1910. In: Paxton, N. ed. *The Methuen Drama Book of Suffrage Plays*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp.3-28.
- Sihra, M. ed. *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*. 2007. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Robins, E. 1910. *The Women Writers*. [online]. 2 May, Criterion, London. [Accessed 10 November 2015]. Available from: <http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/robins/waysta/way13tw.htm>
- Rudolfsdottir, A. 2005. *The Day the Women went on Strike*. The Guardian. [Online]. [Accessed 14 November]. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/18/gender.uk>
- Sihra, M. 2015. *Letter to the Irish Times*. 16 November.
- Wajcman, J. *Managing like a Man: Women and Men in Corporate Management*. 1998. Polity Press, Cambridge.