Pam Gems:
Rethinking Her Life and the Impact of Her Plays on British Stage

Dissertation

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By

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ABSTRACT

Pam Gems (1925-2011), the first woman writer to be commissioned and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, paved the way for theatres to commission more works by women playwrights. A number of her plays transferred from the subsidized sector to the commercial West End and Broadway. This dissertation is the first book-length study on the life and impact of Gems' plays on the modern British stage from 1970's to the present. The majority of her work centers on women from history, especially the history of entertainment such as Edith Piaf, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo. By reviving celebrated women from the past with her revisionist writing, Gems not only eschewed the traditional male-dominated narratives, but also provided ammunition for actresses and women directors to emerge and prosper. Drawing from my interviews with British theatre artists (including Jane Lapotaire, Nancy Meckler, Penny Cherns, Denise Black, and Sue Dunderdale), my dissertation provides new insights into Gems' work. A crucial part of my dissertation is a documentary that I produced and directed to explore the history of feminist theatre in the UK and define Gems' role in its development.

Dedication

To all women in my life, especially my mother, my wife, and my daughter Nora

Acknowledgments

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Publications

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"From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

"Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. August 2017 issue.

"Zahrā Khānum Tāj al-Salṭana and Mary Wollstonecraft: A Comparative Study of '*Memoirs of Tāj al-Salṭana*' and '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'." *International Journal of Persian Literature*. 2017 issue.

Fields of Study

Major Field: Theatre

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Pam Gems (1925-2011) started her playwriting career late in her forties by writing radio plays. It was in the early 1970s that she first became involved in the London fringe theatre. Concurrent with the establishment of Women's Movement, she contributed to the development of women's theater. She was one of the first postwar generation of women writers who successfully emerged and more crucially continued to produce work on British stage. Among women playwrights Gems' achievements were so impressive that the critic Lyn Gardner called her "the grand dame of British Theatre."[1] Gardner observed that "where Caryl Churchill may have conquered Broadway, it was Gems who made a more powerful impact. Gems was the first female playwright who forced West End managers to reconsider the long-held opinion that Agatha Christie is the only woman of note the British theatre had produced."[2]

Gems wrote her first drama, the radio play *The Leg-Up*, as early as 1958. Between 1958-1970, when dramatists like Shelagh Delaney (1938-2011), John Osborne (1929-1994), and Arnold Wesker (1932-) practiced kitchen sink realism on British stage, she wrote plays for radio and television. In 1972, she presented her first live theatre production, *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*, at the Cockpit Theatre, London. She continued

[1] Gardner, Lyn. "Precious Gems." *Plays and Players*, April 1985, p. 12.
[2] Ibid., 12.

writing plays until 2009 when she said farewell to the world of theatre with the creation of *Dispatches* (*Feelings*).

I classify Gems' fecund list of theatrical works into two major categories: original plays and adaptations. Her original plays can be organized into two different categories: in one group are plays like *Go West Young Woman* (1974), *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1976), and *Aunt Mary* (1982) in which she questions and addresses current sociopolitical issues. In the other group are plays like *Queen Christina* (1977), *Piaf* (1978), and *The Snow Palace* (1998), which are based on historical figures and are written in the style of revisionist biographical dramas. This category can be described as "feminist history plays" that, as Katherine E. Kelly observes, narrates history "from women's, especially from working-class or Plebeian women's, points of view [and] creates a past sometimes overlapping with, but often distinct from, that of men."[3] Gems was also active in adapting well-known plays from a female perspective. Her adaptations include *A Doll's House* (1980), *The Cherry Orchard* (1984), *Camille* (1984), *Danton Affair* (1986), *Uncle Vanya* (1990), *The Blue Angel* (1991), *The Seagull* (1991), *Ghosts* (1994), and *The Little Mermaid* (2004).

A prolific playwright, Gems primarily focused on the social and sexual oppressions of women after World War II between the 1970s and 1990s in Britain. The majority of her plays have women playing major roles with male characters in supporting ones. This includes *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Deborah's Daughter* (1994), and *Camille*. Her women, with varying degrees of infamy and celebrity, use their position in society to

[3] Kelly, Katherine E. "Making the Bones Sing: The Feminist History Play, 1976-2010," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. p 202.

challenge patriarchal systems and values. Following the style of many early feminist plays, some of her work such as *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* have no male characters. Yet several of her works centered on the stories of men which included her award-winning *Stanley* (1996), as well as *Garibaldi, Si*! (2000), *Aunt Mary,* and *Frantz into April* (1977). In this respect Gems' work reflects a pragmatically versatile approach to gender, one which excitingly presents males and females as being of equal concern for her. In an interview with Michelene Wandor, Gems noted that "men as well as women are both victims as well as perpetrators of the system, caught up within it, inexorably damaged and damaging."[4] While the majority of her plays centered on the lives of women, she did not exclude the male stories.

Gems was the first woman to have a play produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), repeating this feat six times, becoming the first playwright in the history of this world-renowned company to do so. Her RSC productions include: *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Guinevere* (1979), *Camille*, *The Danton Affair*, and *The Blue Angel*. Gems' plays received equal acclaim in the United States. She was nominated for two Tony Awards: in 1997 for *Stanley* (Best Play), and in 1999 for *Marlene* (Best Book of a Musical).

With many successful and award-wining scripts Gems established herself as a major player in the modern British theatre. Yet she received far less critical attention in academia compared with other female playwrights of similar status. Ironically, the most devoted dramatist of biographical drama lacks a detailed biography herself. Her work was crucial in the development of British theatre because a significant number of her

[4] Michelene Wandor, *On Gender and Writing*. London: Pandora Press, 1983. p. 150.

plays were considered groundbreaking. She was the first woman writer to be produced by RSC; *Piaf* was the first subsidized play that was transferred from the fringe to commercial West End; *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* was the first feminist play that transferred from fringe to the West End; and she was the first woman writer to win an *Evening Standard* Award.

Defining Gems' position in British theatre requires a detailed conceptualization of the social, financial, and historical development of the British culture and theatre in the late 1960s and the decades following. The theatre establishment experienced four major socio-cultural challenges during the second half of the twentieth century: a) the Angry Young Men movement that was triggered by John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), b) formation of alternative and fringe theaters, a phenomenon that grew very fast after the abolition of Theatre Act in 1968, c) establishment of the Women's Movement, which is also known as the second wave of feminism, and d) the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister and her antagonism towards arts. The Angry Young Men was an anti-establishment movement initiated by a group of artists (many from the working class) who showed discontent with traditional beliefs, morals, and ideologies of Britain's class-ridden society.

Concurrent with the 1968 protests the second-wave of feminism, with its sexual revolution, brought social, political, and economic hopes for women. It was during this period that feminist theatre developed and functioned by claiming a place for women. Also, larger established companies reconsidered their policies and opened their doors to more experimental works and new playwrights. With the help of the Arts Council, small-scale theatres thrived in the second half of the twentieth century. Alternative and fringe

theatre became very popular as they dealt with contemporary social issues and many tended to be critical of the political scene. A new wave of publications including *Time Out* that began publishing its weekly theatre listings and reviews in 1968, and *Spare Rib*, a second wave feminist magazine, which challenged stereotypes and promoted collective action, went on sale in 1972.

Yet this sense of optimism that was generated during the 1960's and 1970's turned into the age of doubt in the 1980s under the government of Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013). After her economic policy was established, the Arts Council faced draconian budget cuts and the number and level of grants decreased. Major subsidized theatres like the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre tended to commission plays that could secure box office income. Regional and alternative theatres, which would encourage new plays and experimental works, had to decrease the number of their productions and became more conservative in their commissions.

Socialist feminist Juliet Mitchell wrote about the effect of Thatcherism on women's issues: "our aim was equal pay; a tragic effect of our achievement was to remove pay as obstacle and then to erode the conditions of employment, to help lower the expectation of social security, state benefits, trade union support… workers' solidarity… to make way for a mobile, flexible worker and the self-employed."[5] The monster that women were fighting at this time incarnated the form of capitalism with its ability to metamorphosize in different shapes, to fuel its consumerist agenda.

[5] Mitchell, Juliet. "Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism," in *What is Feminism?* Ed. Nancy F. Cott, Ann Oakley, and Juliet Mitchell. New York: Pantheon, 1986. p. 43.

Gems began her writing career at the same time with the Angry Young Men movement and she was significantly influenced by their outspokenness and critique of the status quo. She astutely observed that the angry men focused exclusively on men. The number of significant female roles by male playwrights was rare, so she committed herself to address that. By reviving celebrated historical women with her revisionist style of writing, Gems not only eschewed the traditional narratives, but she cultivated the ground for emerging actresses to prosper on the stage. The Women's Movement combined with fringe theatres fueled her inspiration. Soon she paved her way into the mainstream, establishing herself as a feminist playwright with a range of plays that centered on the lives of women.

While a number of feminist theatre scholars have identified Gems as one of the pioneers of the feminist theatre, none of them ever carried out a substantial study investigating her personal and professional life. The research on Gems so far is limited to a handful of essays, dissertations, and book chapters. To date, the only published book on Gems is Dimple Godiwala's *Queer Mythologies: The Stageplays of Pam Gems* (2006) in which she employed an applied critical theory to survey the major plays of Gems. This monograph is an extension of a chapter that Godiwala wrote on Gems in 2003 in her earlier book *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream Since c. 1980*. In *Queer Mythologies*, Godiwala utilized the work of Derrida, Cixous, and Deleuze to explore the concept of female mythology in modern Western civilization. Godiwala claimed that her book "is an attempt to critically situate Gems'

original stage plays within the mainstream."[6] But I find her over-obsession with post-structural criticism distracts her from her primary subject matter. She assessed Gems' plays exclusively within a queer framework and did not consider Gems' significance within women's theatre history or the socio-political context in which she lived.

Catherine Itzin, Helene Keyssar, Michelene Wandor, Lesley Ferris, Christopher Innes, and, Elaine Aston also wrote about Gems. Itzin's *Stages in The Revolution: The Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (1980) is the earliest book of criticism that acknowledged Gems' significance in the development of women's drama. Itzin highlighted that "Gems was one of the first – and the very few – women to write a serious play that reached the West End."[7] Keyssar, In *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (1984), explained that Gems advocated for women via consciousness-raising through her plays. Keyssar stated that "parodies of stereotypes of women, role reversals, vivid imagings of female sexuality and women's ambivalences about their bodies were all non-reductive strategies"[8] that dramatists like Gems used to make their audiences aware of gender distinctions. Ferris, In *Acting Women*: *Images of Women in Theatre* (1990), introduced Gems as one of the contemporary women playwrights who de-mythologized man-made images of women throughout the history. Ferris maintained that Gems' adaptation of *Camille* (1984) "revises the narrative of the 'penitent whore' by presenting prostitution explicitly as a

[6] Godiwala, Dimple. *Queer Mythologies: The Original Stageplays of Pam Gems*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2006. p.17.

[7] Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Metheun, 1980. p. 290.

[8] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1984. p. 127.

business transaction with women as commodity of transaction."[9] By selecting her protagonists from influential historical figures, Gems revisited these women who were used by history and then overlooked by it. Gems *used* this history as a means to address contemporary society by connecting women from the past to the present. Innes in *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (1992) pointed out that Gems distanced herself "from the radical and more subjective side of the feminist movement."[10] He observed that her historical plays "reinterpret history from a female perspective."[11]

Other example of scholarship on Gems includes theses and dissertations. In "Gender, Myth, and History in Recent British Playwrights"[12], Robert Shannon Turley compared selected plays of Edward Bond (*The Woman*), Caryl Churchill (*Top Girls*), David Hare (*Plenty*), and Pam Gems (*Queen Christina*). Turley remarked that these playwrights, like New Historicists, reconstructed the way of representing the past. In her dissertation, "Myth, Biography and The Female Role in The Plays of Pam Gems," Rachel Lucy Turner assessed five plays: *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Camille*, *Marlene*, and *The Snow Palace*, and declared that "the ideological uses of myth and more particularly biography, as a form of myth in relation to gender" are apparent in all these dramas.[13] Turner believed that "Gems strongly embraces the concept of female plurality as opposed to a

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[9] Ferris, Lesley. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. New York: New York University Press, 1990. p. 168.

[10] Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 452.

[11] Ibid., 453.

[12] Turley, Robert. *Gender, Myth, and History in Recent British Playwrights*. PhD Dissertation. Florida State University, 1992.

[13] Turner, Rachael Lucy. "Myth, Biography and the Female Role in the Plays of Pam Gems." PhD Dissertation. University of Warwick, 2000. p. 8.

restrictive 'feminist' label in her revisionary recreation of the female role."[14] Gems' female protagonists are representations of both the private and public life. Their characteristics shift and change over time giving the audience three dimensional women who live on the stage. In a thesis by Margaret Frances Savilonis, the author compares the plays of Gems and Caryl Churchill between 1976-1984 to demonstrate the ways "in which feminist theorists have, or not, made room for mothers and mothering."[15] Inspired by the statement of Betty Friedan that "the inequality of woman, her second-class status in society, was in historical reality linked to that biological state of motherhood,"[16] Savilonis explores the concept of desire and practice of motherhood in their plays.

The literature review above highlights the ways in which Gems's plays are either approached as a case in a comparative study with other playwrights or are investigated through the lens of theory. None of the above studies investigate her role in the establishment of women's theatres and the development of feminist drama. I address this issue here. I consider both the history of her personal life and the history of her career. Perhaps more importantly, I investigate the reasons for this oversight in academia and the lapse of interest in her plays by the theatre establishment.

Methodology

Biography writing has passed its once-skeptical place in academia and has become, as scholar David Levering Lewis wrote, "securely established in contemporary

[14] Ibid., 8.

[15] Savilonis, Margaret Frances. "'--give Us the History We Haven't Had, Make Us the Women We Can't Be': Motherhood & History in Plays by Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems, 1976-1984." MA Thesis. University of Texas at Austin, 2004. p. 10.

[16] Friedan, Betty. *The Second Stage*. New York: Summit Books, 1981. p. 77.

academe and in popular culture."[17] Biographical research not only has found a solid place in academic discourse, but it also provides both possibilities and responsibilities useful and promising for the development of modern thoughts. Unlike the presumption that biographers solely look back to history, especially into a life of a person situated within a specific historical period, to expose reality and truth about the existence and functionality of him/her, biographers, as Virginia Woolf observed in "The Art of Biography," "must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe."[18] Therefore, biographers, apart from having a deep knowledge of the era as well as the individual of their study, are required to have a wisdom about the cultural zeitgeist in which that person lives. A biographer must be able to interpret the social, psychological, and in my case the literary psyche of my subject. Such a comprehensive probe requires discretion and constant curiosity in order to define the form and methodology of this research. I did not limit the prospect of this research by looking at Pam Gems through a single or secondary lens. Once I started my work I knew that I needed to employ a variety of methods in order to get a deeper understanding of her impressive career. Yet, among other methodologies, historiography significantly informed my attitude and approach for this project.

Historiography is, as Thomas Postlewait defined it, "not only the methods that define and guide that practice of historical study and writing but also the self-reflexive

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[17] Lewis, David Levering. "The Autobiography of Biography." *The American Scholar*, Summer 2014, https://theamericanscholar.org/the-autobiography-of-biography/

[18] Woolf, Virginia. "The Art of Biography," reprinted in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays*, ed. Rachel Bowlby. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1993. P. 149.

mindset that leads us to investigate the process and aims of historical understanding."[19] Under the umbrella term historiography, a variety of methods including oral history, archival study, and critical/textual analysis helped me to investigate my subject. I structured the biographical lens of this study based on a chronological order with critical thematic approach. My analysis of Gems' personal and professional life begins with her childhood in the early 1930s and concludes with her death in 2011. I examine her major plays in their original contexts and follow them with excerpts from critics and reviewers. It is important to note that when the subject of a biography is female, as Sarah Alpern maintains, "gender moves to the center of analysis."[20] As a male biographer of Gems, I was conscious that women's lives, and their life cycles, differ from those of men. To have a more accurate vision of Gems' world, I selected my primary list of resources from female perspectives [books, articles, archives] and primarily interviewed female actors, directors, and theatre scholars for this biography.

I am particularly interested in the oral histories I have recorded of the women and men who closely worked with Gems. Oral history provided a terrific opportunity to record the first-hand accounts of Gems while memories and experiences were still relatively fresh and available. Gems passed away in 2011 and still the memory of her is living via her friends, family, and co-workers. The recordings I made in summer 2015 include interviews with theatre professionals such as Sue Dunderdale [director and joint literary executor of Gems' estate], Penny Cherns and Nancy Meckler [directors], Keith,

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[19] Postlewait, Thomas. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[20] Alpern, Sara. *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992. p. 7

David and Jonathan Gems [Gems' husband and sons], Jane Lapotaire and Denise Black [actresses who had major roles in Gems' productions] and Sue Parrish [the artistic director of Sphinx Theatre Company]. The material of these conversations is an original component of my research. They provided me with new insights into Gems' work at rehearsals as well as unveiling a range of conflicts and controversies that I address in this research. My project includes both a written text, and an interview documentary. This documentary highlights the role of Gems in the establishment and development of British feminist theatre. Part of this documentary, my interview with Jane Lapotaire, has been screened for the first time at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London on September 18, 2017.

In addition to oral history, in the summers of 2014 and 2015, I visited major archives in Britain, including those at the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Royal Shakespeare Company to gather material on Gems and her contemporaries.

Chapter Breakdown

Before elaborating on how I discuss Gems' life and body of work in the various chapters, I would like to provide a panoramic view of her career. I divide Gems' chronology to three distinct periods: the first period covers her writing from 1956 to 1976. During these twenty years, she directed most of her attempts towards finding her way in theatre industry by writing radio plays. She was a mother of four and did not have the time necessary to attend stage rehearsals, not to mention the practical fact that she lived outside of London. When she moved to London in the 1960s, she was fortunate that

this transition coincided with the Women's Movement and the burgeoning of the London fringe. After her self-sponsored production of *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* in 1972, she met Ed Berman who commissioned her for lunchtime plays for the Inter-Action Company. This opportunity led to the first Women Festival in the 1973 and the establishment of Women's Theater Group and Women's Company. With Women's Company, she staged *Go West Young Women* and *My Name is Rosa Luxemburg*. At the same time, she expanded her scope of productions to fringe festivals and regional theaters. In 1975, her play *Up in Sweden*, which is about nihilistic violence among Swedish teenagers, was produced at the Haymarket, Leicester. She also had two plays at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1976: *Guinevere*, which narrates the story of the royal couple of Camelot from a feminist perspective, and *Dead Fish*, which was later on renamed to *Dusa Fish, Stas, and Vi* and transferred to the commercial West End.

The second period of Gems' career spans 1976 and 1996 and is the height of her success and achievements. During this phase, she received commissions from the major British theatres including the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre. With plays such as *Franz into April*[21], *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Pasionaria*[22], *Marlene*, and *Stanley*, Gems scored a notable success with biographical dramas. She believed that "it's quite useful… to start with a known protagonist because, in a way, you start one act in. You introduce people to a semi-familiar world and then you play another

[21] It is based on the life and career of a psychotherapist, Fritz Perl (1893-1970) who coined the term Gestalt Therapy. It was performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, directed by Frank Hatherley. It starred Warren Mitchell as Franz and Lise Hilboldt as April.

[22] *Pasionaria* was produced in 1985 at the Playhouse Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne under direction of Sue Dunderdale. It is based on the life and work of the leader of the Spanish Civil War, Dolores Ibarruri or 'La Pasionaria' (1895-1989).

game."[23] Gems also made adaptations that were highly appraised in Britain including Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull*, both performed at the National Theatre. Her other adaptations include *A Doll's House*, *Camille*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Danton Affair*[24], *The Blue Angel*[25], and *Ghosts*.[26] In 1982, Gems wrote an original play, a male-centered comedy, that stands out in her works: *Aunt Mary*. Produced at the Warehouse Theatre, London, it confused its cotemporary audience with content that was unlike her other works. It narrates the story of a transvestite bisexual, Mary, and a transvestite gay, Cyst. They live at their provincial retreat in Birmingham and work as anonymous writers. They have a community of friends that consists of an elderly woman, Muriel, and a middle-aged Jack, who joined them for his recuperation after a sex-change operation. Their family-like privacy is violated by the appearance of a media producer, Alison, who plans to turn their life into a documentary. The play ends happily, like so many comedies such as those of Shakespeare, with marriage. This marriage is different, however, as it involves three 'women': Mary, Cyst, and Muriel, thus breaking the norm for a comedy while still remaining comic.

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[23] In an interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997. p. 94.

[24] Adapted from Stanislawa Pryzbyszewska's *The Danton Case* (1929), this play is based on the conflict of French Revolutionaries Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) and Georges Danton (1759-1794).

[25] *The Blue Angel* is an adaptation of Henrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat* (1905) that was made into a German film, *The Blue Angel* (1930), which Josef von Sternberg directed with Marlene Dietrich in the lead role.

[26] For the full list and the details of Gems' adaptations, please refer to the first appendix.

The last phase of Gems' career extends from 1996 to 2009 and includes her lesser-known plays. During this period, she adapted Lorca's *Yerma*[27], Ibsen's *The Lady of the Sea*[28], and Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*[29]. She continued writing biographical plays in this phase as well including *The Snow Palace*[30], *Nelson*[31], and *Mrs Pat.*[32] Indeed, *Mrs. Pat* was the last play of Gems that received a full production in 2006. The play explores the life of the English actress, Mrs Patrick Campbell (1865-1940)[33], whose "ferocious allure," as Gems wrote, "still lodges in the imagination. She is remembered for her wit, for bad behaviour, and for her close friendship with George Bernard Shaw."[34] Set in the twilight of Mrs Pat's career, this play portrays her battles with a predominantly male world. It sheds light on how Shaw persuaded her to enact the

[27] It was directed by Helena Kaut-Howson at the Royal Exchange Theater, Manchester. Denise Black starred as Yerma.

[28] Staged at the Almeida Theatre, it was directed by Trevor Nunn.

[29] Produced by The Sphinx Theatre Company, it was presented at the Greenwich Theatre. Sue Parrish directed it with Lydia Fox in the protagonist role.

[30] It is about the polish writer Stanislawa Pryzbyszewska (1901-1935). It was produced by The Sphinx Theatre Company at the Tricycle Theatre. It was directed by Janet Suzman with Kathryn Pogson (Stanislawa) in the principle role.

[31] It is based on the British officer in the Royal Navy, Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758-1805). It was directed by Patrick Sandford at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton. The cast included Stephen Noonan (Horatio Nelson) and Hannah Barrie (Fanny Nisbet).

[32] The play premiered at the York Theatre Royal, under Sue Dunderdale's direction, on 13 March 2006.

[33] Born Beatrice Stella Tanner in London to an English father and an Italian mother, Mrs Pat took the name from her first husband Patrick Campbell (1884-1900), and used it even after his death and during her second marriage to George Cornwallis-West (1914-1940). She made her stage debut in November 1888, in Liverpool, in Herman Vezin and Robert Buchanan's play *Bachelors* (1884). It was her performance as Paula in Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, in 1892, that brought her into public attentions. She made her first Broadway appearance in Hermann Sudermann's *Heimat* in 1900. Her greatest acknowledgment, however, is for originating the role of Eliza Doolittle in George Barnard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), a role that she performed at the age of forty-nine.

[34] Gems, Pam. *Mrs Pat*. London: Oberon, 2006. p. 5.

role of Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* against her will. Some years later, when in France, Mrs Pat undergoes a severe financial hardship and asks Shaw to permit her to publish their personal letters, a request that he turns down flat and threatens to pursue her legally if she publishes them without his permission. Mrs. Pat dies in south of France, lonely and in destitute.

After the production of *Mrs Pat*, which Gems called "a love letter to the theatre,"[35] she wrote some more original plays that never received full productions such as *Garibaldi, Si!*[36], *Ludwig* (*Winterlove*)[37], *Despatches* (*Feelings*),[38] and *Ethel*[39]. Gems has also made a series of adaptations that are still unproduced including Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* and *The Father*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

I break down my exploration of Gems' life and career into six chapters. In chapter two, "Pam Gems: The Beginning," I approach her early life and profession along both chronological and developmental lines. I investigate where and how she was raised, what impacted her during her childhood and adolescence, and how she entered the field of theatre. I also elaborate on how her personal life affected her subsequent writing [definitely this aspect would extend to following chapters as well]. Gems passed her childhood in destitution and under extreme financial pressure. She lost her father when

[35] In an interview with Dominic Cavendish published in *The Daily Telegraph* on March 6, 2006.

[36] About the Italian general and politician Guiseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882).

[37] It explores the life of King Ludwig II of Bovaria (1845-1886) and his close friend Elizabeth, empress of Austria.

[38] Sue Dunderdale directed a stage readings of *Despatches* and *Ludwig* (*Winterlove*) at the Drill Hall, London in 2009.

[39] Portraying the American performer Ethel Merman (1908-1984), this play is set in a hotel in New Haven, Rhode Island. Reminding of the 1970's consciousness-raising sessions, this play informs that some African women are dispelled from their villages and have to live in the jungle because of their fistulas.

she was only four and, along with her two brothers, was brought up by her mother. She attended grammar school till fifteen and after that quit it to work in varying jobs. After working with the British military, as a machine gun assessor during the World War II, she received a tuition-free admission to Manchester University where she studied psychology. At Manchester, she met and married her husband Keith Gems. It was during this time that her interest in theatre awakened – primarily through her experience with and great love for cinema. Gems explained in an interview that she was from the first generation that regularly went to see films. Her interest in the subjects of some plays like *Queen Christina* and *The Blue Angel* derived from her fascination with film stars like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. I consider the influence of mainstream cinema and these actresses in her oeuvre.

Gems began her writing career in the mid 1950s concurrent with Angry Young Men movement. She was a mother of four children at the time and his time and energy-consuming task primarily obliged her to write only radio plays, which needed less work out of home. In the late 1960's, the Gems family moved to London and she became involved in fringe theatre. Although Keith Gems was not a fervent fan of theatre, he financially helped her to put on her early plays on the stage. Gems' first produced work, a semi-autobiographical play *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* (1972), is about a small girl, who lives with her widowed mother, and is sexually assaulted.[40]

In chapter three, "Alternative Theatre, Gems and Women's Companies," I discuss how Ed Berman, the founder of Inter-Action company and the artistic director of the

[40] In an interview with Gems's elder son, playwright Jonathan Gems, I learned that Gems was molested during her childhood.

Almost Free Theatre (AFT) in Soho, approached Gems to write two 'sexy' pieces for his lunchtime theatre. After the successful production of this double-bill, Berman commissioned a Women's Festival for AFT that ended up being responsible for establishing some women's companies: Women's Theatre Group [renamed to Sphinx Theatre Company in 1991] and Women's Company. I elaborate on the role of Gems in shaping and promoting these companies. Also, I examine the sociopolitical context of England in the second half of the twentieth century and I thoroughly investigate the development of Women's Movement that was influential in the advancement of women/feminist theatre.

Theatre as a location for advocating women rights came to being primarily during the suffrage movement, which produced a significant amount of drama, not to mention that women playwrights have been long present in British history.[41] However, it was in the eraly1970s and after women's movement that feminist drama started to evolve as a distinct genre. Apart from the contextual knowledge of the era, capturing Gems' worldview requires a comprehensive analysis of her entire body of work, which I testify is rare among women playwrights. To understand the significance of her drama, it is important to approach her plays both individually and as an organic part in a bigger corpus. In this chapter, I highlight the history and significance of Gems' *Go West Young*

[41] Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639), Jane Cavendish (1620-1669), Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), Aphra Behn (1640-1689), Delarivier Manley (1670-1721), and Susannah Centlivre (1667-1723) are just a few playwrights of early modern England. For more on women and theatre during suffrage movement please see: Najar, Esmaeil and Reza Kazemifar. "Suffrage Movement and the Subversion of the 'Juridico-Discursive' Power in the Victorian Period: Elizabeth Robins and The Concept of 'New Women'." *K@ta: A Biannual Publication on the Study of Language and Literature*, Volume 18 (December 2016 issue).

Woman, My Name is Rosa Luxemburg (1976), and *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*. The first two plays were produced for the Women's Company and the latter was staged on Edinburgh Fringe before transferring to the West End.

In chapter four, "Bridging the Gap Between Alternative and Mainstream Theatre," I discuss how Gems could bridge the gap between alternative theatre and commercial West End with her biographical history plays. After the success of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, Gems' works began to be staged by the major subsidized and commercial theatres in London. The Royal Shakespeare Company produced six of her plays: *Queen Christina*, *Piaf, Guinevere*, *Camille*, *The Danton Affair*, and *The Blue Angel.* The Royal National Theatre put on Gems' *Stanley*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Seagull*. *Piaf, Camille, Stanley,* and *Marlene* also prospered in the West End. I examine Gems' success on big stages changed the status of women in the British theatre.

Queen Christina was the first play by a woman playwright to be produced at the strongly male-centered RSC. It provided a chance for an actress, Sheila Allan (1932-2011), to stand up center stage. Gems also asked for a women director to direct this production. Penny Cherns was given the chance to lead this challenging production. Gems's next play, *Piaf* (1978), based on the life of a celebrated French singer Edith Piaf (1915-1963), gave to Jane Lapotaire her first protagonist role. Lapotaire in an interview with the author explains how this opportunity changed her professional career. It is worth noting that during her long playwriting career Gems attempted to revive influential women marginalized in male-written history. She particularly showed great interests in dramatizing the lives of woman performers.

By creating plays based on historical women, Gems simultaneously invested in actresses in her time. For example, by *Piaf*, Gems both revisited the iconic French cabaret singer Edith Piaf and took Lapotaire's career to another level. *Marlene* similarly revived the German actress Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992), and helped Sian Phillips shine on stage. Another play of Gems which received both national and international acclaim is *Stanley* (1996). In contrast to Gems' other works, *Stanley* explores the life of a male artist, the English painter Stanley Spencer (1891-1959). The play won the 1997 Laurence Olivier Award and Evening Standard Award for 'Best Play', and brought the Olivier Award for the lead actor, Antony Sher. Like *Piaf, Stanley* transferred to Broadway.

In chapter five, "Doubly-Lost: Gems and Her Reclamations of Actresses", I explain why against all her successes in the alternative, subsidized, and commercial theatres, Gems became almost forgotten in the British theatre and in the academia. Gems with her revisionist biographical history plays provided space and opportunity for her audience to see history through a woman's work. Drawing from my interviews, I record how theatre establishment and academicians received her and her work. Although she was acclaimed by both groups for some of her plays, she was mostly criticized for her approach and subversive drama. I chronologically examine the seminal works of feminist/women's theatre since 1970s and demonstrate how they criticized Gems and her body of work. To analyze this aspect of historiography of feminist criticism, I study Gems in parallel to Caryl Churchill, the other celebrated woman writer who initiated her career concurrently with Gems. Churchill's evolution as a playwright parallels Gems: they both began their work with writing radio plays, produced their first stage plays simultaneously with the emergence of Women's Movement, established themselves as

promising playwrights in the mid 70's, and subsequently moved to the West End and Broadway. I investigate how the critics and theatre scholars led one of these playwrights to prominence and the other one to the sidelines of British theatre.

Gems herself made some unhelpful choices too. Some of her statements, like her rejection of the title "feminist writer," provoked scholars and some critics to overlook her in their works. In addition, she did not promote herself despite the impressive commissions she had from major subsidized companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. Finally, the era in which she worked was the time of burgeoning collaborative work for women. In an interview with Roland Rees, her first director, Gems explains that women started to advance in theatre when they began working collaboratively: "in a business with eighty percent unemployed, the position is tough anyway. The guys will not move aside. Where would they go? So it made us take our destiny into our own hands." [42] Yet, Gems herself never believed in collective writing, a strategy that a number of women groups practiced at the time. This belief made her reject the Joint Stock Company's offer and consequently she lost the chance to be produced at the Royal Court Theatre. A survey of modern British theatre demonstrates how influential the Royal Court and its administrators were in the introduction and stabilization of playwrights. Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, and Sarah Kane are just a few playwrights who found advocates at the Royal Court.

In the conclusion, I sum up my findings and provide my analysis of Gems' position in modern British drama and theatre. I include two Appendices. The first

[42] Rees, Roland. *Fringe First: Pioneers of Fringe Theatre on Record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992. p. 197.

appendix provides the full list of Gems's plays and the details of when, where, and who have directed them. In the second appendix, I provide the transcription of the interviews I conducted with the various artists, family members, and others who knew Pam Gems.

Chapter 2: Pam Gems, The Beginning

Pam Gems was born Iris Pamela "Pam" Price in a small village named Bransgore, New Forest, Hampshire, on 1 August 1925 to James Price (1904-1930) and Elsie Mabel Annetts (1908-1989). Her Welsh father, who worked as a coal miner in Christchurch, died of tuberculosis when Gems was only four years old. When Gems' father died, he had nothing to leave her except a war book; Gems recalled:

> When he died he left me a war book which I used to read in bed by the light of a candle – we didn't have gas let alone electric light. I loved it because he gave it to me, but it was terrifying – there were cartoons of the Germans as boars with traps on their noses which ran with blood.[43]

Elsie raised Pam and her two brothers, Derry and Mickey, in absolute poverty. She had no choice as a single parent. She worked in the homes of upper-class families as a cleaner. Gems wrote: "I was made the scapegoat for all this and I had to bring up my two brothers because she was charring all day in the big houses where they wouldn't even give you an orange."[44] The money Elsie made was not enough to support the family; one brother was asthmatic and the other had heart problems. Gems' mother was not also immune to the impact of the Depression and for a period of time fell into the doldrums,

[43] In an interview with Naim Attallah, *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p. 121.
[44] Ibid., 121.

adding to the misery of the family. At the time, there was no government welfare, so Gems' family depended on the charity of their neighbors and handouts from the church to survive. The humiliation she experienced during this time made an everlasting impact on her. Many years later, she recalled a stinging memory from this time in a discussion with her elder son Jonathan: after Sunday congregation, the poor and destitute of her parish would form a line in the church for the vicar and his assistants to give out alms from their wicker baskets. Such handouts included shoes, clothes, food, and toys, among other things. Sometimes the vicar, would refuse alms to those who had 'misbehaved' during the previous week, reproaching them - "you were bad last week, you were rude." Such childhood experiences gave Gems strong feelings about class. In an interview with Naim Attallah, she explained: "we were brought up on white bread and sugar. People said: 'Oh, you can't give her meat, it's much too strong for that little stomach.'"[45] In the play *The Leg-up*, which I discuss later on in this chapter, Gems speaks out about her family's poverty and other people's disdain towards them.

As a girl, Gems was very scared of men's voices, running and hiding whenever a milkman or a postman came to their door. Much later she confided to her son, Jonathan, that she had been molested at early age. These experiences can perhaps explain the source of the distressing imagery that appears in her first stage play, *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* (1972). Gems' insecurity and fear of public life could very well be the reason why she turned to writing. Gems was an intelligent child and wrote her first play at the age of eight, "encouraged by the staff of the priory church school in Christchurch."[46] The

[45] Attallah, Naim. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p. 124
[46] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. England: Penguin, 1985. p.1.

school teachers and headmaster were astonished that such talent could come from the poorest of the poor. Gems noted: "I was lucky, for I attended a wonderful church school with a headmaster who'd grown up in Stratford-upon-Avon and who spouted Shakespeare all the time."[47] The school did a reading of Gems' play about goblins and elves. Gems reminisced: "the teacher cut some of the lines and I was very upset; I've since learnt that directors do it all the time."[48] This creative writing paved the way for Gems to receive support from the school. She and her brother were granted scholarships to go and study in grammar school. Gems stated that:

> I was left-handed, and my writing in ink in those days was very bad, so when the letter arrived saying that I had won the scholarship, I thought, well they've made a mistake. And I just put the letter up behind the clock and I don't think we looked at it for a couple of days. Then my mother read it and she said, memorably, 'well, you can't go of course, but you had the honor of winning.' Fortunately, she mentioned it to the relieving officer – that was what we called the man from social security. He was very nice, one of those lost-generation men, crippled in the war, and when my mother told him he said that I must be allowed to take it up. He went to the British Legion and they paid for my uniform and my books. I will always be grateful to them, so I went to grammar school, thanks to the fact that my mother was so frightened of this

[47] Ibid., 125,

[48] In an interview with Lyn Gardner, "Precious Gems," *Plays and Players*, April 1985, p. 12.

> middle-class man, the relieving officer. When you were working-class in those days, you were very obedient, often for fear of losing your job, you did as you were told.[49]

Gems explained that the life-changing scholarship "caused local bitterness, and people were right, it seemed unfair that two people in one family should be privileged"[50] in this way. Between 1936-41, Gems attended Brockenhurst County Grammar School in New Forest. She always had her head in books and studied hard. She quickly learned French, and began to work on her thick southern accent in order to make herself sound like a standard middle-class English girl. One's spoken voice was a crucial marker of status and identity in Britain's class-defined world.

Finishing secondary school at fifteen, Gems left to start working various odd jobs. Starting off in a laundry and dry cleaner, she also worked for an aircraft factory and a glue factory in New Forest. She likely would have carried on like this if not for the intervention of World War II, which was a double break for her from both the hard work in the factory and from her mother. Coming into her teenage years, Gems' relationship with her mother became increasingly complicated, and Gems, quite ironically, decided that she would find peace in war. She explained her decision for joining the army:

> I couldn't wait to get away. I joined up partly because of D-DAY plus 2, when a lot of the chaps who were billeted on us got killed, and I had a rage and joined up. But it was mainly to get away from my mother; the house couldn't contain the two of us. I was

[49] In an interview with Naim Attallah, *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p. 124-125.

[50] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977. p. 11.

> beginning to go out and have dates, the atmosphere was diabolical…[51]

Besides her personal interest in getting away from her family, enlisting also looked attractive to her because of the opportunities it provided her. In the first half of the twentieth century, the world wars provided women with job opportunities, many of which were previously inaccessible to them. For the first time, the government encouraged women to enter the labor market, apply for job openings, and have access to training opportunities. With men on the battlefield, women were now permitted to enter the public sphere in new ways, taking on jobs that were previously denied them. This well-documented change in social geography affected women as individuals and the dynamics of family life dramatically. Gems joined the Women's Royal Naval Service and filled various roles in WRNS's air service section, from packing parachutes to doing radio transmissions and working as machine-gun assessor.

The war changed everything for Gems. During the war and while with the WRNS she made her acting debut in small shows produced for soldiers. She later related her wartime experiences in a semi-autobiographical screenplay, still unproduced, named *Finchie's War* (2000). Gems described how her romantic relationships became somewhat promiscuous during the war in an interview with Naim Attallah: "there were more men on the street than sand in the gutter. We used to get engaged all the time and wear rings around our necks – I had five or six – and if one got killed we threw that ring away."[52] Elsewhere she mentioned:

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[51] In an interview with Naim Attallah. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p.122-123.
[52] Attallah, Naim. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. P.123.

> We all did a bit of whoring on the side… it was wartime, exciting, all those nylons and tins of spam for Mum. Sheaths were the useful contraception in those days – jelly and stuff was middle-class, we didn't like putting stuff inside ourselves, it was a bit rude. I was lucky not to catch anything. A lot of the girls did get babies, there were some weird, quick marriages.[53]

After the war, she worked as a teacher in a local school in Hampshire for a year. In 1946 she learned that, as a veteran she could receive a scholarship to study at the University of Manchester. Despite wanting to pursue a course in English literature, she ended up studying psychology, admitting, "I didn't know what it meant at the time, but the queue was shorter than for the English Literature."[54] Gems never came to like psychology, she remarked:

> I hated it, because we were all more stressed by the war than we knew… a lot of us were very damaged. Besides, I didn't agree with Jung and Freud, who were the gods there. It was all middle-class, Jewish, Viennese, *fin-de-siècle* stuff. But I was a farm girl; I had stood and watched the horses being served, and I couldn't subscribe to the Freudian basis of RIS, repressed infantile sexuality. Come off it, not where we came from. Also, we had to

[53] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977. p. 12.

[54] In an interview with Vlaire Colvin, "Earth Mother from Christchurch," *Plays and Players*. August 1982. p. 9.

> visit loony bins, and they were terrifying then. All the boys used to faint. I'm afraid I have kept my hatred for a lot of psychiatry.[55]

Despite her dislike of this field, Gems' research experience in psychology provided a subject for a few of her later plays including *Frantz Into April* (1977), which is based on the life and work of the influential psychiatrist Fritz Perl (1898-1970) who coined the term Gestalt Therapy.

While studying at university, Gems worked as a research assistant for British Broadcasting Channel. She explained: "I really wanted to write and I was told that if you joined the BBC, that was the way in."[56] At Manchester, she befriended many literary and theatre types, including the playwright Robert Bolt (1924-1995), who encouraged her interest in playwriting. University of Manchester at the time was one of the central institutions for communist intellectuals including Bolt himself. So far there is no evidence to claim Gems was also involved in communist circles. However, her working-class background as well as the working-class subjects that she chose for some of her plays, such as the communist politician Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria) proposes this hypothesis that she was, at least partially and for a period, drawn to communist ideals.

While in Manchester, Gems met her future husband Keith Gems (1922-2016). Keith came from a wealthy family and inherited a wax-making factory from his father, Leo, whose father Harry passed it on to him. Keith, who studied architecture at Manchester, developed the factory and invested in making mannequins for shop

[55] In an interview with Naim Attallah. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000.

[56] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977. p.12

windows.[57] When Pam and Keith began their relationship, they soon decided to live together, a bold move at the time considered a scandalous act for unmarried couples. They ran into difficulties finding somewhere to live due to this prejudice. Their youngest son, David, explained that "the place that they found where they had a room was a brothel in Manchester."[58] On 3 September 1949, Pam and Keith Gems married and settled in Bembridge, Isle of Wight, where Keith could indulge his passion for boats and sailing.

During and after the war, especially when in Manchester, Gems developed a strong interest for cinema. She was from the first generation of cinema-goers who were introduced to the glamor and allure of black and white films. Her fascination with such stories and their female stars affected her work greatly. In a foreword for *Marlene*, she wrote that she "didn't stop reading, anything up to four books at a time, twice weekly from the town library. But this fodder for the mind, heart and soul was supported by three times a week to the local Regent Cinema."[59] Her relationship to Hollywood film influenced her writing in at least in two ways. First, it imprinted her style of cinematic writing as will be discussed in following chapters. Best exemplified in *Piaf*, this style runs consecutive short scenes into one another and connects them with blackouts reminiscent of filmic montage. Second, cinema nurtured a passion in Gems for utilizing the images of Hollywood actresses on stage. Gems had great interest in re-visiting

[57] Keith Gems's factory was the first to create mannequins that looked like actual people. In 1960s, after the tragic death of his young designer Jacque Bodart, Keith asked Pam to design for his factory and interestingly she came up with the design of a successful display figure The London Look, based in the style of British fashion model Mary Quant (b. 1957).

[58] In an interview with the author.

[59] Gems, Pam. *Marlene*. London: Oberon Books, 1998. p 7.

celebrated performers of the twentieth century such as Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992), Greta Garbo (1905-1990), and Ethel Mermen (1908-1984). As director Nancy Meckler observed, Gems "loved actors. She loved big, extraordinary, bold performers."[60] She was particularly drawn to Garbo and Dietrich. Her deep connection with the star power of these actresses inspired Gems to draw sources from three of their films: in 1977, she wrote *Queen Christina* (Garbo, 1933), in 1984 she adapted *Camille* (Garbo, 1936), and in 1991, she wrote *The Blue Angel* (Dietrich, 1930).

Garbo's working-class background was clearly an attraction to Gems as she was a figure who aligned in many ways with Gems' own family situation. Dietrich's arrival in Hollywood ways similar to Garbo's even though she was born to a middle-class family. Their Swedish and German heritage respectively are important as they had to leave their country, started at the bottom of a career ladder that was a challenge for women. They succeeded. Their *femme fatale* personas, though very different, fascinated the public psyche.

Garbo's professional life in Hollywood, unlike Dietrich's, was relatively short and she retired in 1940. During Garbo's fifteen-year presence in Hollywood, she starred in twenty-four films and became one of the biggest box office draws of the 1930s. As Marjorie Rosen observed, "much of what Garbo suggested, Dietrich carried to extremes. She could be more sultry, more masculine. More warm-hearted, and more deadly. Even her appearance exaggerated the original – wider mouth, more veiled eyes, angular

[60] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

cheekbones, and arched brows."[61] Unlike Garbo, Dietrich did not retire 'early'. After the end of World War II, Dietrich took advantage of her popularity as a screen icon and developed a repertoire of songs from her films. She frequented theatres, nightclubs, and cabarets with her solo shows. It was this aspect of her career that inspired Gems to create a biographical drama as a tribute to the enduring talent of the Blue Angel.as I discuss later.[62]

During the early 1950s, Gems family lived for some time in Paris, but returned to the Isle of Wight in the mid 50s. Between 1952 and 1965, Pam Gems gave birth to four children: two boys, Jonathan (b. 1952) and David (b.1956), and two girls, Sarah (1954) and Elizabeth [Lalla] (1965). Their youngest child Lalla was born with Down's Syndrome, a condition that required the family to live periodically in London to provide an effective education for her. Gems maintained that Lalla "was incontinent for nine years and people didn't want to visit us. You tend to retire into yourself then, and that was very good time for me because I wrote."[63] While raising her children, Gems began to write radio and television plays. Raising four children was a full-time job, yet it gave her an opportunity to stay at home, contemplate and write. This period of time in the life of

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[61] Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies & the American Dream*. New York: Coward, MacCann & Geoghegan, 1973. p. 163.

[62] In an interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge published in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, Gems mentioned that "*The Blue Angel* was for the Half Moon when they were going through a rocky patch, but I refused to do it unless they got the rights to the book and then Trevor Nunn happened to read it" [p. 93]. Based on the Heinrich Mann's novel, this play was produced by the RSC at the Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon before transferring to The Globe Theatre, London. It was directed by Trevor Nunn and had Kelly Hunter as the lead role Lola Lola.

[63] In an interview with Vlaire Colvin, "Earth Mother from Christchurch," *Plays and Players*, August 1982. p. 9.

Gems' family coincided with a period of significant change in British culture. Several new writers emerged whose work showed discontent with the traditional beliefs, morals, and ideologies of their class-ridden society. The incarnation of this resentment was the playwright John Osborne. His play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), led to the birth of a new movement known as the Angry Young Men. This term stresses the gendered aspect of this work. In the following I will consider this issue as well as the women's movement that followed fifteen years later. Both were crucial influences on Gems' life and writing in her early career.

The Angry Young Men Arrive

> Where have all the angry young men gone?/ Barstow and Osborne, Waterhouse and Sillitoe/ Where on earth did they all go?
>
> From the song "Where Are They Now," on the 1973 album *Preservation Act 1* by The Kinks

Scholar Luc Gillemen is right when he says that "*Look Back in Anger*, 1956, and not 1945, the end of World War II, became the starting date of virtually every study of post-war British drama."[64] When the play was first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, nobody would imagine that the twenty-seven-year-old John Osborne's play would initiate a literary movement, so well-known that over a decade later it became the subject of a song by the popular British rock band, The Kinks. *Look Back in Anger* very

[64] Gilleman, Luc. "From Coward and Rattigan to Osborne: or the Enduring Importance of Look Back in Anger." *Modern Drama*. 51.1 (2008). p. 106.

quickly defined a new cohort of writers[65], which in addition to playwrights included the novelists, Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, John Braine, Bill Hopkins, John Wain, Kingsley Amis, and the philosopher Colin Wilson. Significantly the members of this movement were by no means united as a collective group. In his seminal book, *Declaration* (1957), Tom Maschler, who interviewed some of the abovementioned artists, explains: "they do not belong to a united movement. Far from it; they attack one another directly or indirectly in these pages. Some were even reluctant to appear between the same covers with others whose views they violently oppose."[66] After the success of *Look Back in Anger*, playwrights before Osborne were accused of "triviality and were caricatured as establishment writers"[67] creating plays that reinforced the values of upper middle-class Britain.[68] Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* openly expressed class discontent on stage and initiated a discursive battle with the establishment. "By focusing upon the psychosexual consequences of caste under contemporary conditions," as Scholar Samuel A. Weiss explained, Osborne "has avoided the manhole of artificial 'proletarian' art and has dramatized a new hero: up from working-class ranks, knowledgeable and articulate, suffering the current intellectual's malaise of lonely frustration, but - unlike the totally disaffiliated bourgeois hero - retaining firm class allegiances."[69] *Look Back in Anger* also

[65] The phrase was derived from the Irish writer Leslie Paul's autobiographical work *Angry Young Man* (1951)

[66] Maschler, Tom. *Declaration*. New York: Dutton, 1958. p. 7-8.

[67] Ibid., 106.

[68] The focus on a younger generation very quickly overshadowed the reputation of major playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century including Terence Rattigan (1911-1977), Noel Coward (1899-1973), J.B. Priestley (1894-1984) and Somerset Maugham (1874-1965).

[69] Weiss, Samuel A. "Osborne's Angry Young Play." *Educational Theatre Journal*. 12.4 (1960): 285-288. p. 288.

succeeded because of its anti-hero's vitriolic language and its unconventional dramatic content not to mention its appropriate timing[70], when as Jimmy Porter says, "there aren't any good brave causes left."[71] In the 1950's, as John Elson wrote:

> It became impossible any longer to dismiss politics as the uncouth squabbling over power from which a sensitive man would shrink. Politics hung over our lives in the threatening shape of a mushroom could. Men were either going to have to solve their problems or cease to be men.[72]

Osborne's literature was brimful with a political straightforwardness combined with a celebration of a working-class masculinity. The effects of these were heightened by his uncensored language, which had a powerful duality: it was both passionate and resentful, driven and reluctant, terse yet loaded with criticism. More important was the play's novel approach in storyline and content. Jimmy, worn-out by his working-class past, traumatized by his father's death, and frustrated by Britain's postwar decay, believed that "the wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying."[73] However, not being in a position to directly address his discontent towards people in power/government, he discharges his anger on his upper middle-class wife Allison, who is pregnant but scared to tell Jimmy. Alison is seen, as Wandor observes, "not only as sexually voracious, but as a vindictive mother who is preventing

[70] 1956 was the same year as the Suez Crisis, Hungarian Revolution, and protests of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) which was founded in 1957.
[71] Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*. New York: Penguin, 1982. p. 84
[72] Elsom, John. Post-War British Theatre. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979. p.70.
[73] Ibid., 94.

Jimmy from giving birth to himself, finding his meaningful identity as a man."[74] It is this desire of [social] revenge that makes Jimmy unjustly reproach his wife:

> If only something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognizable human face emerge from that little mass of indie rubber and wrinkles. Please – if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognizable human being yourself. But I doubt it.[75]

In the theatre, Osborne's unquiet spirit, bolstered by production of his second major play *The Entertainer* (1956), with Laurence Olivier as its lead role Archie Rice, seemed to be contagious. It inspired playwrights to follow his initiative in expressing their anger and to question the status quo in their writing. Edward Bond (1934-), John Arden (1930-2012), Arnold Wesker (1932-2016), Stan Barstow (1928-2011), Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010), and Keith Waterhouse (1929-2009) were among the playwrights whose works benefited from the critical receptivity and public interest that Osborne's initial works provoked.

This plethora of angry voices coincided with the establishment of George Devine's English Stage Company (ESC) at the Royal Court Theatre that became a powerhouse for producing socially focused and politically challenging plays.[76] In the

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[74] Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. P. 144.

[75] Ibid., 37.

[76] Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in Stratford, East London, established in 1953, was also a new initiative to cultivate playwrights and actors preoccupied with social class and British identity.

same year that ESC produced Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble visited London and stunned theatre goers and critics alike with their productions of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948). Witnessing a theatre company committed to a political agenda, with a staging and performance style that stressed and underscored the writing, was a revelation for many, and undoubtedly reinforced the significance of pursuing social issues on the British stage. However, this impetus did not impact women and their representation on British stage positively.

Women who gained a sense of autonomy from conventional roles during World War II had to face a new wave of plays that popularized brutal masculinity as portrayed in *Look Back in Anger*. For having a potent male character, Osborne characterized Alison as a flimsy, easily damaged 'Other'. "Jimmy is a rebel in class terms," as Wandor writes, "but in terms of the world of this play, the only way in which he can construct a battleground that has any meaning for him is if the opposition is female."[77] He justifies his self-serving attitude by referring to his wife as "Lady Pusillanimous," which etymologically means someone who is lacking male courage and strength, and is timorous, fearful and gutless. [78] This sense of superiority in Jimmy not only eclipses Alison's presence but also targets her ethics and mentality. Alison confides to her friend, Helena:

> It's what he would call a question of allegiances, and he expects you to be pretty literal about them. Not only about himself and all

[77] Wandor, Michelene. *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama*. London: Methuen, 1987. p. 11.
[78] Ibid., 21.

> the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well. All the people he admires and loves, and has loved. The friends he used to know, people I've never even known – and probably wouldn't have liked. His father, who died years ago. Even the other women he's loved.[79]

Unlike the role of Jimmy, Alison's character is underdeveloped in this play as a number of critics have noted.[80] For example, when she leaves the flat, "we stay with Jimmy, rather than following her. She is thus not allowed space to develop as a character in her own right."[81] Indeed, Alison, as Michelene Wandor writes, was "humiliated by her author as well as by Jimmy."[82] Alison's lack of space in this drama actually projects women's lack of space in drama and theatre industry during 1950's and 1960's. Between 1956-75 the Royal Court Theatre, as the major institution to introduce new playwrights, "produced only seventeen plays (out of over 250) which were written and/or directed by women."[83] Yet, an expectancy for changing women's situation and images in the British theatre developed with the emergence of the first generation of post-war women playwrights that included Jane Arden (1927-1982), Doris Lessing (1919-2-13), Margaret D'Arcy (1934-), Shelagh Delaney (1938-2011), and Ann Jellicoe (1927-). Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems also emerged as new voices in radio drama at this time.

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[79] Ibid., 42.

[80] Michelene Wandor's book *Look Back in Gender* (1987) focuses on the ways in which this male movement had a negative effect on women's roles that continues to this day.

[81] Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. p. 144.

[82] Ibid., 144.

[83] Ibid., 142.

Female Roles, Female Voices

In the 1950's, Ann Jellicoe and Shelagh Delaney more than others kindled the sparks of change for representation of women in British theatre. The twenty-year-old Delaney wrote *A Taste of Honey* that quickly brought her the title 'angry young woman'. The play was produced by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1958, and the next year transferred to Wyndham's Theatre in the West End. *A Taste of Honey*, set in Delaney's native Salford, Lancashire, portrays the unhappy life of a seventeen-year old working-class girl, Jo and her mother, Helen. Both have a series of unsuccessful romantic relationships with men. Helen goes out with a rich man, Peter, who is some years younger than her, but after she benefits enough from him, she leaves. Jo begins an affair with a black sailor, Jimmy, who promises to marry her; however, after proposing, he leaves for sea and leaves Jo pregnant and alone. At the end of the play the women reunite and live together content without men. Dealing with the working-class characters in a realistic manner, set in a provincial area, and openly articulating discontent with the status quo provided enough evidence for critics and audience members to consider this work as a part of Angry Young Movement. In an interview with Laurence Kitchin, Delaney explained her reasons for writing this play:

> I had strong ideas about what I wanted to see in the theatre. We used to object to plays where the factory workers came cap in hand and call the boss 'sir'. Usually North Country people are shown as gormless, whereas in actual life, they are very alive and cynical.[84]

[84] Kitchin, Laurence. *Mid-century Drama*. London: Faber & Faber, 1960. p. 169.

One year before *A Taste of Honey* premiered in London, *The Observer*, set up a competition to discover new talents in playwriting. Among the winners was a young actress, Ann Jellicoe, who won a prize for her play *The Sport of My Mad Mother*. The play was subsequently produced by George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre. Jellicoe's major success, however, was her play *The Knack: A Comedy in Three Acts* (1962)[85], which was also staged at the Royal Court Theatre. Regrettably, neither Delaney nor Jellicoe could maintain their theatrical momentum beyond their early successes. Delaney, unable to repeat the success of *A Taste of Honey*, tended to write for screen, and Jellico altered her focus towards directing and became celebrated for creating community plays.[86]

In the meanwhile, instead of practicing kitchen sink realism on stage, Gems focused on her writing for radio. Although she appreciated the theatrical innovation in Angry Young Men – especially outspokenness and articulation of discontent with the post-war establishment and middle-class complacency, she was aware of the misrepresentation of women on stage. She noticed the lack of good roles for women and attempted to fill this gap at the time with radio plays. Choosing radio as her medium for presenting her work likely had two reasons: first, she was not permanently based in London and did not have easy access to the London theatre community to stage her works. Second, she was well aware that to succeed in a male-dominated theatre industry, a woman playwright needed to be too lucky no matter how much talent she had.

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[85] This centers around three carefree men who seduce a young girl who is new to London and is discovering the neighborhood.

[86] For more on Ann Jellicoe's community works, please see her book *Community Plays: How to Put Them On (1987)*.

Between 1956 and 1972, Gems wrote more than fifteen radio plays, most of which were never produced.[87] Her first success was *The Leg-Up*, produced by Mary Hope Allen for British Broadcasting Channel in 1958, and starred Patricia Hayes (1909-1998) as a poor girl Hazel. In this autobiographical play, Gems dramatizes how she was accepted in a grammar school, which caused her family, classmates, and neighbors to develop contempt for her. Her theatrical counterpart, Hazel wins a scholarship to go to high school. Her single mother, favoring her son John and spiteful that he did not win, initially hides her resentment. The mother's feelings are made manifest when she tells Hazel that she must work rather than study because she believes that she will find a job sooner that way:

> Mother: If you think I can afford to waste money for you to dress up like a college girl, you're mistaken. The sooner you're earning your living and get your head out of those books, the better, though God knows who'd employ you.[88]

Like Gems' own mother, she works as a maid for upper-class families to be able to support her family. Some of their well-off neighbors are jealous because they think Hazel won the scholarship due to the school administrators pitying her, rather than due to her talent. Once her mother finally agrees to send Hazel to the school, the neighbors donate their used clothes and uniforms to the family, humiliating them. At the new school, the students make fun of Hazel's working-class accent and the way she eats with her hands because she does not know how to use a knife and fork. Experiencing the full

[87] Please see appendix for the full list of plays.
[88] Gems, Pam. *The Leg-Up* (unpublished), p. 5.

force of class prejudice, Hazel, unlike Gems, decides she no longer wants to continue with her education.

Gems also wrote several TV plays during this period, of which only one, *A Builder by Trade* (1961) was screened. Like her radio play *The Leg-Up*, this work is based on a biographical reality: it dramatizes Gems' early relationship with Keith Gems in Manchester when they lived together as a couple before they were married, a radical and anti-establishment act at the time. Gems was not at all pleased with the production of this play. She claimed that: "they did it very middle class and I wanted it to be about working-class people and nobody seemed to know what I was talking about."[89]

Living outside of London, Gems realized that she could not accomplish as much as she hoped in her writing. Her concerns over her youngest daughter also influenced her family's move to London permanently; this was the best place for Lalla's education. Gems and her family moved there in the late 1960's. The move was a turning point in her writing career as she explained:

> I came to London with my family to get specialized training for my youngest child, who is mentally handicapped. Because her preschool nursery hours were from ten to three-thirty I was free to go to lunchtime theatre. The atmosphere was pleasant and informal, there was often food and drink on sale. I began to make acquaintances, and to write for the fringe.[90]

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[89] in an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory", *Spare Rib*, September 1977. p.12

[90] In an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987. p. 205.

Gems' relocation occurred during a promising time, one that had quite an effect on her way of thinking. It was a progressive period for both the Women's Movement and the fringe and alternative theatres. It was during 1968 that mass socialist movements took place around the world. They consisted of protests in opposition to the Vietnam War and students' uprisings in Paris that included strikes of workers, all of which helped to define the zeitgeist of the time as one that was distinctly counter-culture. This inspired a worldwide spirit of freedom from social and political repressions that had a global impact.

Women's Movement

It was in the late 1960s that women in America, France, and Britain began to fight for their rights. As a socio-political movement, this struggle very rapidly spread into other countries and enormously affected women's lives. It was the first time since suffrage campaigns that women from different backgrounds came together to question the restrictive conditions. Up to then they were expected to marry and become either isolated within the constraints of home or work in secondary jobs like clerks or secretary. With the growth of educational opportunities, and their experience from the world wars' jobs, more women gradually came to this understanding that marriage and motherhood cannot offer complete satisfaction and must be accompanied with more societal and female jobs.

The Women's Movement was seeking sexual, economic, and reproductive rights. It asked for equality and the recognition of women's status, and encouraged them to resist

patriarchal dominance. Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986) was among the earliest contributors to this movement.[91] She directly pointed her criticism to fundamental sexual inequalities of Western culture. In her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), as Diana Holms observes, De Beauvoir "scandalized not only conservatives but also the male Left with her thorough and radical critique of male appropriation of subjecthood and consignment of women to the role of 'Other'."[92] She famously declared that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman,"[93] and "no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."[94]

The spirit of feminist resistance was hugely influenced by the American Civil Rights movement and the New Left, which stirred up new interest in Marxism. In 1973, the socialist feminist Sheila Rowbotham voiced strong interest in this revival as she explains:

> I consider the solution to exploitation and oppression to be communism, despite the hollow resonance the word has acquired. It seems to me that cultural and economic liberation of women is inseparable from the creation of a society in which the conditions

[91] De Beauvoir was a member of the French Movement de Liberation des Femmes (MLF).
[92] Holmes, Diana. *French Women's Writing, 1848-1994*. London: Athlone, 1996. p. 123
[93] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1953. p. 273.
[94] Ibid, 273.

> of their production and reproduction will no longer be distorted or held back by the subordination of sex, race, and class.[95]

Thinkers like Rowbotham clearly understood that women's emancipation would only come about if all women, including those in the lower classes, were politicized. After women unionized workers and formed small groups, they began to talk amongst themselves and express more widespread concerns about issues like abortions and health care. Soon greater consciousness-raising became a mission for women activists who pushed women to speak up about things they had never spoken about openly before. They practiced putting aside their fear and discharging their anger. The most outstanding difference between Women's Movement and the previous suffrage campaign, was that by 1969 many women had attended universities and received degrees. They expanded their horizons by taking courses in history, anthropology, political science, psychology, and finance, and began to read and discuss books by authors from Marx and Engles to Sartre and De Beauvoir. Certain movement leaders brought different historical and theoretical perspectives to their collectives that helped develop and strengthen consciousness-raising, a term first introduced by the radical feminist Kathie Sarachild. This strategy was "both a method for arriving at the truth and as a means for action and organizing. It was a means for the organizers themselves to make an analysis of the situation, and also a means to be

[95] Rowbotham, Sheila. *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. p. xvi.

used by the people they were organizing and who were in turn organizing more people."[96]

The movement's first public protest was organized by Robin Morgan (1941-) on September 7, 1968 in the USA. Morgan and almost 400 other women led a demonstration against the Miss America Pageant outside the Atlantic City Convention Centre on the day of the competition and attracted the media's attention. Feminist activists criticized Miss America for promoting an "unbeatable Madonna-whore combination."[97] Since that year, many feminists began to challenge existing social stereotypes is a variety of ways. Journals and magazines that had previously been edited by men let women have a section. Others established their own specific journals, including the popular and celebrated *Spare Rib,* founded in 1972 in London.[98] Feminist scholars began to develop a new theoretical discourse that was being widely discussed. In 1970 Germaine Greer raised women's consciousness about their sexuality with the publication of *The Female Eunuch*, in which she criticized the institution of the family. Greer believed if women are to achieve liberty, they must first liberate their sexual desires as passive sex objects.

The British sociologist Ann Rosamund Oakley (1944-) published *Sex, Gender and Society* in 1972, where for the first time, the distinctions between biological sex and gender were fully articulated. Later scholars like Judith Butler built upon and argued that gender roles are manufactured, rather than being biologically defined. Kate Millet (1934-

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[96] Sarachild, Kathie. "Consciousness-raising: A Radical Weapon" in *Radical Feminism*. Ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone. New York: Quadrangle, 1973. p. 148-149.

[97] "No More Miss America," in *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*. Ed. Alexander Bloom, and Wini Breines. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p. 406.

[98] Other women's magazines that were founded in the early 70's were *Women's Report, Women's Voice*, and *Red Rag*.

) and Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012) provided arguments that were foundational for the movement. Millett and Firestone, respectively, wrote *Sexual Politics* (1970) and *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). *Sexual Politics* is the first real work of feminist literary criticism that approached the works of major literary figures like D. H. Laurence, Henry Miller, Sigmund Freud, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet from a feminist perspective. Firestone, drawing from Marxist dialectical materialism, argued that class divisions are based on biological reproductions, not on economic production. She claimed that women's dependence on men is due to their physical vulnerabilities, like menstruation and childbearing. She asserted that "the heart of women's oppression is her childbearing and childbearing role."[99] She continued: "the child was just another member of the large patriarchal household, not even essential to family life."[100] She concluded that both family and children threaten a woman's happiness, and therefore are better abandoned. Consequently, the 'New Wave' feminism of the 1970s, with its famous commandment, 'the personal is the political', encouraged feminists to cut their ties with the patriarchal world as much as possible and count on their female-inclusive groups. Even "romantic love," as Pilcher and Whelehan write, "could be viewed askance as part of patriarchy's repressive regime."[101] It was in this period that different practices emerged as multiple 'feminisms', breaking open the movement's sense of solidarity. Scholars began to articulate these now-separate branches as liberal, socialist and radical.

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[99] Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Morrow, 1970. p. 72.

[100] Ibid, 77.

[101] Pilcher, Jane, and Imelda Whelehan. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, 2004. p.44.

Feminist Drama

Within this context, a new dramatic genre was born: 'feminist drama'. Theatre as a medium for advocating women's rights came into being primarily during the suffrage movement, which produced a significant amount of drama.[102] But it was not until the mid-1970s that feminist drama started to emerge as a distinct genre. Besides producing publications and organizing conferences, women turned to drama "as a viable genre for expressing their newly awakened feminist consciousness."[103] Feminist drama owes its formation in some part to the establishment of fringe and alternative theatres [arts lab, lunchtime theatres, and socialist companies], a phenomenon that grew very quickly after the abolition of Theatre Act in 1968. Alternative and fringe theatres became particularly popular as they dealt with more contemporary social issues and as they grew more dissident. The establishment of the Women's Movement and the expansion of theatre subsidies in the late 60s further fueled this growth. As Danielle Duggan asserts, "growing from the women's movement was a movement within theatre, the liberation process beginning in society was an environment which fostered a struggle in theatre for its own liberation."[104] The missions of Women's Movement and feminist theatre were in some places similar: both wanted to challenge the female stereotypes propagated by men, remove derogatory myths, define women's roles in private and public life, and of course open women's paths into equal space and job opportunities. The growth of small-scale

[102] Cicely Hamilton (1872-1952) and Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952) were among the major playwrights of this campaign.

[103] Mael, Phyllis. "Beyond Hellman and Hansberry: The Impact of Feminism on a Decade of Drama by Women." *Kansas Quarterly* 12.4 (1980): 144-44. p. 141

[104] Duggan, Danielle. *Feminist Critique of Language Using Selected Texts of Pam Gems and Megan Terry*. Dublin: University College Dublin, 1992. p. 9.

theatres helped the proliferation of opportunities for women and many writers focused on women's issues. During this period, as critic Lyn Gardner writes, "there was a growing hunger for women's work."[105] The empowering of British feminist theatre in the 70s and 80s led to the establishment of second wave of female playwrights including Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill (1938-), Michelene Wandor (1940-), Timberlake Wertenbaker (1946-), and Sarah Daniels (1958-).

Gems maintained that "at first I felt the movement was for younger women – flat-bellied, tough, radical women. I was fat, flabby and a failure. But I discovered the fringe theatre and I did start writing."[106] Soon she became one of the pioneers of the women's movement in theatre. To defy conventional norms, she wrote strong roles for women and preferred having her works produced and directed by women. A significant portion of theater going public were also eager to see new, fresh and often provocative visions by the women. As a result, they were able to reach new audiences. In this way, they directed their efforts against the established theatre industry and their participation brought forth a healthy rivalry of competing interests introduced by the explosion of the alternative theatre.

The Breakthrough: *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* (1972)

Gems' first professionally produced stage play -- *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* -- was one of the earliest plays by a woman on the London fringe. This work uses Gems' own early life story as its inspiration. At times a comic agit-prop fairy tale written for

[105] In an interview with Lyn Gardner, "Precious Gems," *Plays and Players*, April 1985, p. 12.
[106] Interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977, p.12.

children, it underscores the challenges women face in their personal relationships. It further examines issues of class, choice, and how to condemn sexual assaults and address trauma. Set in a small town between the world wars, it is centered around the trials and tribulations of a thirteen-year old Betty Butler and her family. Ever since the death of her father from consumption, Betty, her brothers, and their mother have been living in an impoverished part of the city called 'Stink Alley'. In the first scene, through a series of quick incidents, Betty is bullied by a verger, an errand boy, and a vendor of hot potatoes when she is out to deliver clothes that her mother has washed for a wealthy family. Gems visualizes various sexist situations that a small girl like Betty faced during that time. She directs her criticism of the class-ridden British society in the second scene, where Betty is invited to the private party of her rich classmate, Honeywell. She is hesitant to go as she has not have a proper dress to wear to such a party. At last she decides on a carnival dress made of paper, but is forced to wear her ragged petticoat underneath to fend off the cold. At the Honeywell, while playing Blind Man's Buff, her paper dress is torn, from the bodice to the skirt, revealing her tattered petticoat. Betty blushes and bursts out of the house in tears. Not wanting to go back home and face her mother, she runs off into woods. There, an unscrupulous man, Mr. Silver, looms up behind her. After evading his attempts at forcing himself upon her several times, Betty is finally grabbed, and we hear a loud scream.

From here the story takes on a fairy tale-like style, a kind of surreal *Alice in Wonderland* that invites children to engage with a handful of myths in a picaresque journey. Gems deconstructs tropes of Arthur as he is not interested in playing the male part. He is neither interested in fighting dragons nor expects Betty to fill the role of a

traditional woman. Betty rejects Arthur's attempts to woo her and instead chooses to waltz with Arthur's brother, Peter, at the ball. Their dance is interrupted, however, by a horrific attack on the palace by the Goths, who take possession of the town. The Chief Goth emerges out of nowhere and engages Peter in swordplay. He is about to strike the killing blow to Peter but Betty interferes and saves him. The Goth lifts her up with one hand, exposing her petticoat. Unlike her reaction to the similar incident in act one, Betty boldly handles the incident and scolds the Goth:

> Goth: Princess!
>
> Betty: I'm not only a princess, I'm a peasant… so SHUT UP!
>
> Goth: well, whatever you are, there is a bit of fight about you.
>
> Betty: And that's all you care about, isn't it? Fighting!
>
> Goth: what do you expect? I am a man!
>
> Betty: Yesss! And you've destroyed this lovely palace![107]

With examples like above, Gems tries to articulate women's discontents with patriarchy in children language. She continues to show that Betty can comprehend rationally, even within a patriarchal environment, and find the correct path forward. Grabbing a blunderbuss from a nearby soldier, she shoots the Goth point blank. At times deliberately silly, the play manages to provide a fascinating insight to Gems' development as a playwright. It is interesting to see how she melds autobiographical elements with a commentary on contemporary social issues, all in a play, unusual at the time, meant for children. Reviewer Irving Wardle wrote:

[107] Ibid., 62.

> The piece is offered to 'older children and adults', but I am not sure that it is for children at all. Not because of its extreme harshness, and not even because of its range of adult references. But because it seems the kind of fairy tale written out of adult experience by someone who preserves the mechanics and furniture of the pre-adolescent imagination: less a piece for children than the work of a prodigious child.[108]

On personal level, the play expressed a sense of nostalgia for Gems. Speaking of the time between the wars, she writes in the foreword to the play:

> Living was still harsh for many people, the Salvation Army providing the only loving support for many in real distress. But children ran free, in safety. They knew the seasons, from broad beans to mistletoe, the names of trees, wild flowers, what was edible and what wasn't. They knew every bird that flew, every fish in the sea, in the river. They lived off land and sea… men dug, sawed, hauled, mended shoes. Women washed, dried, aired, ironed, scrubbed, cooked, mended, and went out to work as servants to make enough to live on. Relationships were face to face, feuds and all, and no-one had car or a telephone. Everyone walked, or rode a bike.[109]

[108] Wardle, Irving. "Betty's Wonderful Christmas," *The Times*, Thursday, Jan 06, 1972, p. 9.
[109] Gems, Pam. *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*. London: St. Luke's Press, 1972.

Besides encompassing the social atmosphere of the period, this play recalls the personal trauma of Gems: being molested at an early age, an act of violence that instilled a fear in her of strangers and affected her life for many years. We can see that in the very act of writing *Wonderful Christmas,* Gems now has the language to confront her demons, and address issues honestly and simply, in a genre that "seemed the way to begin."[110] The play was produced in 1972 as a matinee by a young David Aukin[111] at the Cockpit Theatre during the Christmas season. Directed by Roland Rees, it starred Yvonne Antrobus (1940-) as Betty. One important point is that this production, like a handful others during Gems' early fringe work, was funded by her husband Keith. His financial support provided Gems with a setting to experiment with both content and form without worrying about the box office. Nonetheless, as a Christmas matinee, the production was well received by the public as well as serving her family with an enjoyable experience. They came to an understanding that, although in her late forties, she could yet succeed as a playwright. Keith Gems recalls the impact the play had on him:

> It was a highly extraordinary experience because it was brilliant, utterly brilliant. I didn't know where it came from. My attitude changed at once. I realized at once she was a master of her trade or whatever you like to call it. And I stopped working every afternoon in the office and went and saw the play, every performance. And I couldn't believe it was so good and I don't go to the theatre much.

[110] Ibid.

[111] This production was David Aukin's first producing venture. He later became the artistic director of Hampstead Theatre, followed by Leicester Haymarket, head of Channel Four Films, and co-director of the Royal National Theatre.

> It was just amazing. I then realized that I had a genius on my hands rather than a nice little housewife who was rather clever.[112]

After *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*, Gems took a more direct approach towards dealing with the status of women; in public and in private, as individuals and as a collective. She began to re-examine the stories of influential women in history from the perspective *of a woman*, and revealing contemporary societal ills through her historical/biographical works. As far as form, she experimented with many different styles, all while keeping a feminist outlook towards literature. After working in traditional Aristotelean structures, Gems experimented with more episodic and non-linear progressions. Her ventures into writing feminist works led Ed Berman, one of the impresarios of London theatre community, to commission her for writing strong feminist solo pieces for his Fun Art Bus.

[112] In an interview with the author.

Chapter 3: Alternative Theatre, Gems, and Women's Companies

> It's not that I don't feel that I can write about men, but when you see the great uncharted waters, the notion of dealing with 2,000 years of men's history just isn't very tempting. When I came to the theatre in the early 70s, I realized that there was no authentic work about women: they were occasionally celebrated but never convincingly explored.
>
> Pam Gems

In an interview with Roland Rees, published in the *Pioneers of Fringe Theatre on Record*, Gems comments that it was in the early 1970s that Ed Berman, founder of Inter-Action, approached her to write two "sexy pieces" for the Fun-Art Bus. In 1972 Inter-action used a Routemaster bus refitted with a small theatre on its upper deck and a cinema downstairs to tour Camden and Kentish Town. The goal was to provide opportunities for people, especially workers and women, to see free lunchtime theatre, a popular entertainment of the era. During this period, the variety and abundance of new plays required the use of new spaces as theatres, and the Fun-Art Bus was one inspired example. It was not uncommon to turn part of a restaurant, pub, tavern, or a warehouse

into a performance space.[113] Before settling down at The Almost Free Theatre in Soho in 1972, Inter-Action held its lunchtime theatres in various places, including Ambiance Theatre, which was located in the basement of the Ambiance restaurant in Queensway in West London. Roland Rees, who worked as a director for Inter-Action in the early 1970s recalls: "The Ambiance was a coffee shop by day at street level. At night in the basement it became a club with steel band music… The acting area was pocket-handkerchief sized. The audience were crammed in nose to nose with action."[114]

Berman, one of the first alternative theatre producers in Britain, was an American Rhodes Scholar, specializing in educational methodology. He believed in using interactive methods to bring structural changes in the education system. He strived to make performing arts interesting for low-income people, accessible to workers who were not available at night or could not afford West End ticket prices. An artist with a pedagogical approach, Berman escaped consumerist America of the early 60s to focus on bringing theatre and community to work in tandem, while at the same time the British Arts Council advocated enthusiastically for alternative performances and experimental theatres. Berman [along with David Halliwell's Quipu] is credited with establishing the first permanent lunchtime theatre in London in 1968. From the mid-1970s onward, Berman extended Inter-Action's social activities. In 1977, he established a resource center and one of the first city farms in Kentish Town.

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[113] A comprehensive list of theatre companies and fringe practitioners can be found on the website of Unfinished Histories, an online archive that records the history of Alternative Theatre in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century: www.unfinishedstudies.com

[114] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 22.

Berman understood that in order to attract new audiences he needed to bring diversity to the stage. To this end he devised various apparatuses to meet the expectations of different groups. He mounted multifarious seasons at his lunchtime theatres focusing on minorities, including 'Black and White Power' [1970, for black playwrights], 'Homosexual Acts' [1975, which led to the establishment of Gay Sweatshop], and 'Rights and Campaigns' [1978, for Jewish people]; he formed an exclusive theatre group for children called Dogg's Troupe. These initiatives, besides provoking theatrical mobilization, helped minorities explore their identities and have their voices heard. Ed Berman also played a significant role in one of the formative moments of modern British feminist theatre by holding the first Women Theatre Festival in 1973 at the Almost Free Theatre.

Women's Theatre Festival of 1973

It was after the successful production of Gems' double-bill that Berman commissioned this women's season. Gems remarks that at first she found it insulting when Berman asked her to write two 'sexy' pieces for his theatre; but then she decided: "it was the heroic days of neo-feminism --- I am not going to give you tit and bum! Just to annoy him, I wrote two strong monologues."[115] She wrote *After Birthday* and *My Warren* for Berman, which, instead of using the Fun-Art Bus, were produced as the double-bill, 'Women's Own', at the Almost Free Theatre in March 1973. Peter James, who was the associate director of the Inter-Action at the time, directed the plays.

[115] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 196.

After Birthday is a twelve-minute monologue that narrates a story of a girl [performed by Sheila Kelley] who shoved her new-born child, "mottled and covered in muck," down the toilet. She is now being kept in a prison hospital wing, where she is under the illusion that her child is still alive. Her baby was conceived through her relationship with a homosexual, who subsequently killed himself by slitting his own throat. The work uses vividly traumatic imagery that Gems dissects throughout the course of the play to familiarize her audience with the emotionally disturbing moments in her character's life.

My Warren is a thirty-minute monologue about a middle-aged woman, Eileen [performed by Janet Henfrey], whose younger colleague sends her a vibrator as a birthday gift. Throughout the show, Eileen, a hypochondriac, airs the regrets of her unmarried life; she never "cheapened" herself to get a man and now is left with nothing but jealousy for her boss's secretary, who in this cruel act, has sent the vibrator. The play ends with Eileen's sexual self-gratification aided by the vibrator. Besides signifying people's loneliness in the time of 'neo-feminism', this play is one of Gems' first attempts to question women's choices surrounding celibacy. Gems explains how the final scene on the stage was a significant risk in the early 1970s:

> Peter James and I took the play to Jan Henfrey playing at the Savoy Theatre. She said: 'I'd love to do it but I cannot do the last bit! We'll have to cut that.' Green as anything, overwhelmed at the being in the West End dressing room, I said, 'sorry about that,' and got up to leave. I knew there was no play without the end. If you cannot be radical on the Fringe, with no money to make, where can

you be? I reached the door and Jan said: 'hang on a minute.' She did it and amazingly Ed said he'd do the play.[116]

Both of these plays are full of profanity and at first glance appear to be offensive. However, reading more deeply, and considering their original context, it is apparent that Gems was trying to push the public boundaries for women by highlighting the real societal pressures on single women in big cities. Gems is bold in her decision to portray how women try to survive stressful situations and traumatic experiences that are often at the heart of everyday life. The reviewer Charles Lewsen wrote that women in these two plays bear "witness to the destruction of the human soul in a world where community and family have disappeared."[117] Lewsen's comment on the dissections of family and community was indeed echoed in Gems' foreword for the double-bill in which she asserted: "I was worried by the dismissal of the maternal in current feminist thinking. Conjugality might need a rethink – babies still needed what babies have always needed, nourishment, protection and love. I threw in a few Greenpeace[118] pleas for good measure."[119] Later she explained: "I was the pre-Pill generation that got married and had children - no choice - but this seemed to me to be the dilemma that women at this time were in."[120] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, she added: "to me these women were tough survivors; the older lady pulled the plug on her tormentors by prudently using

[116] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 196.

[117] Lewsen, Charles. "My Warren/After Birthday." *The Times*, 6 March 1973, p. 11.

[118] Founded in 1971 in London, Greenpeace organization is now active in more than forty countries. Its agenda is to investigate and expose environmental destructions.

[119] Gems, Pam. "After Birthday, My Warren." Afterword. *Pamgemsplays.com*. Web. 4 July 2016.

[120] In an interview with Georgina Brown, "Something out of the Ordinary," *Independent*, 31 January 1996.

the vibrator – waste not, want not – and the other girl was meant to be seen as surviving, though not necessarily in a way convenient to society."[121] Gems' short plays were enthusiastically received by female audiences, something that she modestly observed: "it wasn't the quality of my work, it was the fact that women were very hungry"[122] for such plays by women. After the successful production of these short plays, Berman showed an avid desire for more plays by and about women. He decided to dedicate an exclusive lunchtime season at Almost Free Theatre to this subject, which consequently resulted in the establishment of two women's companies: Women's Theatre Group and Women's Company.

Women's Companies

The early 1970s and the beginning of the second wave of feminism ushered in possibilities for women in the theatre. After Ed Berman's suggestion for an exclusive season for women's plays, a group of women already involved in theatre [including playwrights, directors, actresses, and designers] accepted the responsibility of mounting the first women's season in six months' time. Publishing and distributing fliers and posters, they attracted a good number of volunteers to help run the season. The primary members regularly met at Gems' house in Kensington. They concluded that for this festival, instead of following men's administrative methods, they would form a collective working atmosphere to break up the traditional top down hierarchy. As Susan E.

[121] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977, p. 12.

[122] In an interview with Georgina Brown, "Something out of the Ordinary," *Independent*, 31 January 1996.

Bassnett-McGuire asserts, "the collective that takes decisions jointly and holds joint responsibility without a single identifiable leader was a basic tenet of feminist politics" at the time.[123] Therefore, the administrators of this festival encouraged women with varying theatrical backgrounds to take part in this season. Hundreds of women participated in productions, discussions and workshops. Gems recalled:

> The Almost Free season was a very exciting and traumatic time. You had this heterogeneous mixture of women – rich American students, housewives, teachers on full salary doing it as a hobby, women interested in theatre for feminist propaganda reasons, actresses prowling round for work.[124]

The women involved in the season were both professionals and amateurs who had no real theatrical experience. Some had been active in agitprop performances in the women's movement and saw this event an opportunity to re-unite. All the administrators, designers, and directors, as well as most of the performers, were women. The administrative group selected six plays including Gems' *The Amiable Courtship of Miz Venus and Wild Bill* [directed by Caroline Eves], Diana Brooke's *Love Food* and Michelene Wandor's *Mal de Mere* [both directed by Midge Mackenzie], Jennifer Phillips's *Instrument for Love* [directed by Liane Aukin], American playwright Sally Ordway's *Crabs* [directed by Midge Mackenzie], and Jane Wimberley's *Parade of Cats*.

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[123] Bassnett-McGuire, Susan E. "Towards A Theory of Women's Theatre," in *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984, p. 456.

[124] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977, p.12-13.

Wimberley was the only previously unproduced playwright. Her play was directed by Susan Todd and had Buzz Goodbody in the cast.

Scholar Michelene Wandor claimed that Berman "was in all respects prepared to handover the season to the [women's] group."[125] However, there was one point on which he disagreed with the women's decisions: the choice of plays proposed for the season. As artistic director of the Almost Free Theatre, Berman wanted to have the final word on the season's selection. Gems maintained:

> One of the plays we chose was *Swallows* by Michelene Wandor. There was a big row over this. Ed said: 'I am the Artistic Director and the decision about the choice of the season finally rests with me.' He didn't like *Swallows*. He said it had no structure and didn't make sense to him. To the group, it was the play which we all responded to most. We said to Ed: 'We want to direct, design and light the plays.' He said: 'Ok, you can do the plays you want, but you have to paint out the theatre!' He was testing us, trying to put us off, saying all the old things about women not being able to carry the lights and do the electrics! So, we did it.[126]

All the plays during this season focused on women's issues and women's position in contemporary society, which developed the collaborative ability to work together with a common goal of putting women's stories on the stage. The Women's Season ended up

[125] Wandor, Michelene. *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1981, p. 30.

[126] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 197. – Gems misremembered the name of Wandor's play; in a direct communication with the author, Wandor confirmed that the play was *Mal de Mare*.

being responsible for establishing two feminist theatre companies. Due to philosophical and methodological differences, the people originally involved in the festival split into two groups: the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) and the Women's Company. WTG consisted of less known theatre practitioners. They preferred to write and devise shows in a collective manner. Because their operations were somewhat ad hoc and unstable in the beginning, it is not entirely clear who was the core startup party, but we have some names: Anne Engel, Sue Eatwell, Lynn Ashley, Mica Nava, Clair Chapman, Carola Moon, Julia Meadowes, and Jean Hart. The other group, Women's Company, included already-established playwrights, directors, designers such as Pam Gems, Susan Todd, Yvonne Edgell, Annie Mitchell, Margi Campi, Shirlie Stone, Jacqui Cook, Caroline Eves, Sheila Kelly, Belinda Low, Liane Aukin, Julia Coppelman, Janet Henfrey, Yvonne Dolpra, Helen Downing, Jane Briers, Sheila Kelly, Di Seymour and Jenny Stoller.

Gems was a founding member of the Women's Company, though she explains that she was unwilling to see the community of women that formed during the Women's Festival split. Already an emerging playwright, Gems was not comfortable working collaboratively, and WTG's members did not want to have solo artists within their ranks. Joining the Women's Company with its more theatrically experienced members, Gems explained her decision: "libertarians [the WTG] were implying that there was no skill in theatre, anyone can do it."[127] Also, in an interview with Lizbeth Goodman, she stated that:

[127] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 197.

> We had a stand-off because we had people coming in who were not theatre people – nurses, secretaries – and they would say: 'sorry, I can't rehearse tonight, I'm going out with my boyfriend'. And some of us felt that actors, who tend to be out of work ten months of the year, had a case for saying: 'Look, this isn't respectful to our penury'. Then there was a split.[128]

The founding members of the Women's Company articulated their theatrical mission in their first press release:

> The Women in this company have many years' experience in the theatrical profession and are committed to creating greater opportunity for women throughout theatre… while we intend at all times to present feminist theatre we do not wish to deal in diatribe. Our aim is to illustrate our position by entertainment which is at the same time good enough to create a new awareness and help to correct the inequalities within a profession falsely rumored to be egalitarian.[129]

As the quote implies, the Women's Company employed a less radical feminist approach in its theatrical mission relative to their sister group WTG. Their primary goal was to establish women in theatre as a force because men were completely running the theatre industry. All the members of Women's Company, with nearly thirty members by

[128] Goodman, Lizbeth, and Gay J. De. *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, p. 27

[129] Quoted in Wandor, Michelene. *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1981, p. 33.

1974, helped subsidize their productions. The company tried to procure a base, like a pub or restaurant, where they might perform, as well as a place to offer baby-sitting for mothers. However, these wishes never came to fruition. Both the Women's Theatre Group and the Women's Company applied for Arts Council grants; as an 'amateur' group, only WTG received funding. Women's Company did not survive for much longer, producing two plays in its short, but significant, life.

Go West Young Women (1974)

The first production of Women's Company was Gems' *Go West Young Women* produced in 1974. It was staged at the Round House at Chalk Farm (Camden) and was co-directed by Susan Todd and Annie Mitchell, with Buzz Goodbody as a production assistant. Reminiscent of the old myth of the West representing courage and manhood, Gems' play foreshadows an adventurous future. *Go West Young Women* is a fictionalized documentary of Western pioneers in two acts, set in the 1860s. The title of the play alludes to Horace Greeley's advice to the young abolitionist Josiah B. Grinnell: "Go West, young man, go West." Horace Greeley (1811-1872) was a founder of the *New York Tribune*. He is known for changing the direction of American journalism. Scholar Lesley Ferris asserts that "Pam used the phrase for the play's title because she wanted to change the direction of the role of women in theatre."[130]

Go West is a story of an American family who decides to travel West, to where "women ride the way men do – in pants!"[131] Each act opens ironically with a soliloquy by

[130] In a correspondence with the author.

[131] Gems, Pam. *Go West Young Women* (unpublished), p. 2.

a Native American. He celebrates his rich land: "the air is sweet, the grasses are fresh, the bright streams flow out of the snow banks."[132] However, the monologue develops an ominous turn, ending with "preserve us, oh great Grandfather, from all enemies!"[133] It takes a year for the travelers to cross the states in covered wagons, from Boston to California. They journey across the plains and mountains and have all sorts of experiences. Indians attack their party, killing a good number of them. Throughout their quest from East to West the family finds companions, often based on historical figures. One of these characters is the American educator Catherine Beecher.[134] Gems describes her as "a soberly dressed woman" [5] who advocates for other women traveling West where "a whole generation of children is in danger of being deprived of mental and moral instruction."[135] The politician Asa Shinn Mercer[136] (1839-1917), the reverend Josiah Weeks Canning (1780-1854) are other historical figures that Gems characterizes in this play.

Over the course of the play the mother of the family, Emma, and her daughter, Annie, emerge as the central characters. Their conversations early in the play center on

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[132] Ibid., 1.

[133] Ibid., 1.

[134] Catherine Beecher (1800-1878), a member of the famous Beecher family, was an advocate for women's and children's education. Sister to the celebrated abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1996), Catherine Beecher experienced an unequal education during her school year as the curriculum offered to women was limited. In 1823, she founded the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut and addressed some of the education issues that women and children faced at that time.

[135] Ibid., 5-6.

[136] As a member of Washington State Senate, Asa Mercer was an important figure in old American West. He founded the University of Washington and became its first president. He also advocated for women by supporting a group, The Mercer Girls, to move to Seattle to work as teachers. His idea encouraged many women to travel to Pacific Northwest for respectable jobs and marriage.

how many crinolines they need for the trail; such discussion demonstrates that they are entirely unaware of the dangers of the open frontier. However, by the end they are the only survivors. Now dressed in buckskin and surviving with a squirrel gun and traps, Emma's precision shooting and Annie's trap-setting skills are all that keep them from starvation. Crossing the Rocky Mountains, they become true pioneer women. In the last scene, they arrive at the outskirts of Sacramento hills and encounter a Victorian family having a picnic out on the meadow. They overhear the family speaking about the women of Wyoming and their winning the right to vote.[137] Upon hearing this, Emma and Annie believe that they have arrived in the land of civilization and happiness.

Go West is a celebration of the endurance and strength of women and seemed an appropriate choice for the Women's Company's first production. However, at the first night of the show, two separate groups of feminists twice interrupted the production objecting to the casting of male actors. Gems recalled:

> On opening night, there were two interruptions from two separate militant feminist groups, objecting to the fact that we had men on stage. Feelings ran high in 1974. The show dies on its feet with these rows going on. They were coming down the aisles trying to get on the stage. Finally, the Front of House called in the police. We, The Women's Company did not like that. It made us look the baddies![138]

[137] Wyoming Territory was the first to give women the right to vote in 1869 and Gems probably alluded to this fact in mentioning women of Wyoming.

[138] Rees, Roland. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, 1992, p. 198.

The play and production received mixed reviews. Susan Lowry wrote that "it is informative and entertaining rather than proselytizing. Not that there's not a message. But it isn't hard-sell Red Detachment of Women stuff. It is an attempt, simply, to get away from the romantic movie-inspired image of the Western women."[139] *The Stage*'s reviewer claimed that "the writing is dull, the development predictable, the characterization cardboard. The women seem to have more spirit than the men, which may be the Women's Company point."[140] *Go West* was the first play in which Gems used actual historical figures. Although here they have supporting roles, in some of her other plays like *My Name is Rosa Luxemburg*, *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Pasionaria*, and *Stanley* they become central characters of her plays.

***My Name is Rosa Luxemburg* (1976)**

The second production of the Women's Company was *My Name is Rosa Luxemburg*, translated and adapted by Gems from the French language play by Marianne Auricoste. Like *Go West Young Women*, Susan Todd directed this play at Soho Poly in 1976, which starred Ann Mitchell. Drawing from her correspondences, speeches, and articles, the play tells the story of Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), a German Marxist of Polish-Jewish decent. A leading figure in the European socialist movement at the turn of the twentieth century, she helped form the Marxist revolutionary movement of Germany christened the Spartacus League in 1915. In 1918, she founded the Communist Party of

[139] Lowry, Suzanne. "WC Fields," *Guardian*, 11 June 1974, p. 4.
[140] "Go West Young Women," *The Stage*, 20 June 1974, p. 15.

Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD). Thrown in prison several times for her political activities, she was assassinated in 1919.

My Name is Rosa Luxemburg is a portrayal of the personal and public life of this remarkable woman. There are just two roles: Rosa Luxemburg and a narrator. The narrator's lines, centered around Rosa's social and political activities, imprisonments, and travels, provide an overview of the growth of Rosa's character chronologically. At times, the narrator, played by a male actor, steps into a role and performs a postman, delivering mail to Rosa from which he reads. Rosa's letters, mostly personal, reveal the story of her relationship with her rich lover Leo Jogiches (1867-1919), himself a Polish revolutionary. They also inform us of Luxemburg's communications with socialist leaders of Germany including Mathilde Wurm, Karl and Sonia Liebnecht, and Luise Kautsky.

In this play, as in her later plays like *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* and *Queen Christina*, Gems shows her keen interest in family, marriage, and children. No matter how socially and politically strong they may be, women in Gems' plays do not withdraw from their female side. Accordingly, Gems' Luxemburg is not only an influential woman in the socialist movement of the West, but is also vigilant about her private life. She indisputably yearns for wedlock and children. She writes to Leo Jogiches:

> Oh my love, we must be together. We're still young, we should be living together as man and wife. Let's do it… and even, could it be possible… a baby? Dare I mention that? … A little boy came to me in the park. He was so small, so beautiful in his little coat. He stopped right in front of me and looked into my face, and I had this terrible longing to pick him up in my arms and run as fast as I

could with him back here… I wanted to keep him for my own. Oh,

my dear, can there never be a baby?[141]

Unlike their sisters in Women's Theatre Group, members of Women's Company developed a moderate approach towards men. In the songs, she composed for the play, Gems reiterates this tendency that for a better life, women and men must collaborate rather than compete. In one of Rosa's poems we hear:

I wasn't trying to compete with the man I love.

I wanted to see our victory in the reflection of your eyes.

We will win, together.

I admit, I do want to win. But I don't want to rival you.

I want us to push forward together,

And create something out of nothing.[142]

However, this woman who is moderate and emotional in her personal life becomes a very tough person when put under pressure. In politics, Rosa becomes as hard as iron. She does not retreat and fights for her rights. For example, when she in prison she receives an annoying letter from her colleague - the politician Mathilde Wurm (1874-1935) – attempting to convince her to cease her struggle. To this she replies: "No concessions from now on, in politics nor in friendships. And as soon as I get out of here I'm going to smash you and your whey-faced lot. How's that for a New Year's wish?"[143] By the end of the play, Rosa expresses her discontent with the extremist socialist groups that have taken control of Germany. The narrator ends the show with the description of Rosa's

[141] Gems, Pam. *My Name is Rosa Luxemburg* (Unpublished), p. 5.
[142] Ibid., 7.
[143] Ibid., 20.

kidnapping and assassination in Germany. The reviewer Michael Coveney wrote, "the play is informative and moving; it will please those who already know Rosa Luxemburg and interest those who know very little about her."[144] However, John Peter criticized the play claiming that "political theatre needs more than such cliché-ridden factuality if it is to say anything to anybody."[145]

The Demise of Women's Company; Women's Theatre Group Survives

My Name is Rosa Luxemburg was the second and last production of Women's Company. The company dissolved a short time after and the members dispersed, taking freelance jobs or moving into other companies like Monstrous Regiment and Mrs. Worthington's Daughters. During its short life, the Women's Company explored female subjectivity and strove to provide leading roles for women in theatre. Their two plays planted the seeds for Gems' interest in recovering various figures from women's history for the stage.

Unlike the Women's Company, the Women's Theatre Group survived the advent of Thatcherism with the help of Arts Council funds. WTG "has changed its name twice" since its conception; "first to The National Theatre of Women (in early 1991), and then to The Sphinx (in late 1991)."[146] In an interview with Wolfgang Lippke, Tierl Thompson, one of WTG's founding members, maintained: "we formed very consciously as an all-women's group to create better jobs for women and to devote ourselves to women's

[144] Coveney, Michael. "My Name is Rosa Luxemburg." *The Financial Times*, Wednesday, 21 January 1976, p. 3.

[145] Peter, John. "Theatre Reviews," *The Sunday Times*, 25 January 1976, p. 38.

[146] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 10.

issues through theatre."[147] Their primary goal was to do youth work and raise awareness about social issues affecting women. As their first press release demonstrates, WTG strongly associated itself with the feminist cause:

> Our work is directed towards exploration of the female situation from a feminist viewpoint. It aims also at increasing understanding of the political and social context in which women operate… our group as a by-product of the Women's Movement, has always functioned in a totally collective manner, trying to avoid leadership and hierarchies… one of our most acute problems has been attempting to combine politics and polemic with aesthetics and entertainment.[148]

They did not produce their works in conventional theatre venues. They introduced themselves as a touring company and presented their work in different places like community centers and youth clubs. For some years, they wrote and directed their plays collectively. WTG defined an educational mission, producing new content for a targeted audience. WTG, as Susan E. Bassnett-MacGuire writes, "have always actively encouraged after-performance discussion and their plays may be seen as a prelude to that discussion, often clumsily devised and badly acted but full of crusading spirit."[149] One issue that WTG members exclusively considered for analysis was sex education for

[147] This interview is collected in the WTG archive held at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

[148] Wandor, Michelene. *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1981, p. 32.

[149] Bassnett-McGuire, Susan E. "Towards A Theory of Women's Theatre," in *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984, p. 456.

young women. Their first major production was *My Mother Says I Never Should,* produced in 1974.[150] This play addresses teenagers' first sexual act and educates younger audiences about contraception. It narrates the story of two 15-year-old girls, Wendy and Terry, one [Wendy] thinks she has become pregnant following her first sexual encounter. Though she is mistaken, a doctor puts her and her friend, who is still a virgin, on the pill so they may avoid unwanted pregnancies. Instead of neglecting the fact that intercourse takes place among teenagers, the WTG members decided to accept it and deal with it through the medium of theatre and within an educational context. *My Mother Says I Never Should* toured London schools in 1975 and 1976. It was later filmed and screened at youth clubs and educational centers around the country. In their next productions, the WTG members utilized similar strategies and continued to develop feminist consciousness-raising works. Following a very productive period of collaboratively creating work with company members, WTG changed its strategy in the late seventies and began commissioning playwrights and directors who were interested in their creative process.

Women's Company and Women's Theatre Group were not the only outcomes of the 1973 Women's Festival at Almost Free Theatre. This season planted seeds for other women festivals in the mid to late 70s, like the Women's Theatre Festival at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester in 1975, and the Women's Festival 1977 at Action Space (Drill Hall). Such festivals aided the establishment of multiple feminist groups including Monstrous Regiment, Mrs. Worthington's Daughters, Siren, Spare Tyre, Clean Break,

[150] The first production of WTG was a devised work titled *Fantasia* (1974) that toured London.

Beryl and the Perils, Sadista Sisters, Bloomers, and Hormone Imbalance.[151] All these women-centered theatre groups helped change the methods and means of presenting roles for women on stage and backstage. However, such collective entities were not the only route by which women could enter the theatre, especially for playwrights. Many female dramatists could choose to write for fringe festivals, especially Edinburgh Fringe Festival. One of the biggest hits for women's theatre in the mid 1970s was Gems' *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, which was born at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Significantly, this play is the first feminist play that transferred to the West End.

***Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1976)**

Gems' first major success was *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*. First staged at the Kundry's Theatre in the August 1976, Caroline Eves directed it at Edinburgh with the original title *Dead Fish*. The cast were Linsday Ingram, Sally Watts, Leslie Joseph and Jenny Stoller. The production featured live music, composed and performed by Paul Sand and singer Barbara Jung. In December of the same year it transferred to the Hampstead Theatre Club in London with a new cast and production team. Michael Rudman, who ran the Hampstead Theatre, had seen this play at the Edinburgh Festival and wanted to stage it, but with a few conditions: a new cast, a new production team, and a new title. Rudman and David Aukin, the general manager of the Hampstead Theatre at the time, felt that the title "Dead Fish" would reveal that the title character dies at the end. Consequently, it was changed to *Dusa, Fish, Stas, & Vi*, with Nancy Meckler, directing the London

[151] Please see the complete list on the UnfinishedHistories' website: www.unfinishedhistories.com

production. But even the name change caused some issues. Meckler explains that "it was very difficult to explain the title to people. People would say 'what is that?' because they wouldn't even realize it was names of women."[152] Despite the worry over the play's title, it continued to be a significant success for Pam Gems. In February 1977, the play moved to the Mayfair Theatre in the commercial West End. It won the Laurence Olivier Award for 'Actress of the Year in a New Play' for Alison Fiske who performed the role of Fish.

Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi is a representation of the contemporary situation, with the four title characters coming from different family backgrounds and holding uniquely different views. It is not made clear exactly why and how, but we come to learn that these women all live in Fish's flat. As the plot develops, we find out that they are all in one way or another dealing with major crises in their lives. The play illustrates how society and patriarchal system have pushed them into second-class citizenship and led them to find sanctuary in Fish's flat. They try to survive in a limiting male-dominated society by forming their own community of sisterhood. Gems accentuates each individual's identity within the whole, while at the same time highlighting each character's contribution to the collective community.

The play opens with Violet, a drug addict who never leaves the flat, practicing yoga. She is "as high as the Post Office Tower" as reviewer Jack Tinker described her. [153] Younger than the other women, she suffers from anorexia. Gems describes her as "one of the vast numbers of working class adolescents who are bright, restless or maladjusted

[152] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

[153] Tinker, Jack. "Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi," *Daily Mail*, 14 February 1977, p. 26.

enough to leave home and hit London."[154] By the end of the play she shifts to the other end of the spectrum, eating so much that she ends up in the hospital. After gaining enough energy, self-esteem, and experience, Vi leaves the comfort zone of the flat and becomes a traffic warden.

Dusa is initially introduced as constantly exhausted. Her recent divorce is the emotional source of her misery. At the beginning of the play she is badly preoccupied because her ex-husband has kidnapped their two children. Gems describes her as "a rangy girl with an eye for line, dimensions and color… because she has two children, she is not overtly "material" … i.e. pea-brained or henlike. She is split, displaying the angst and particular vulnerability of the breeding bitch… also the restless boredom."[155] Dusa's insecurity is represented in multiple ways in the play. In Act I, she is nervous and speaks aggressively. Instead of sleeping in her bed, she sleeps on a big armchair cuddling up in a fetal position. In Act II, when she learns that her husband has taken their children to South America, she becomes hysterical and faints.

Stas is a physiotherapist at a hospital where she works with brain damaged children by day and by night works as a high-class call girl. She is working hard to achieve her goal which is saving money to study marine biology in Hawaii. To fulfill her desire to study, she does not even hesitate to shoplift. She comes from a working-class family. Gems introduces her as "magnificent to look at… big, majestic stare… she rarely smiles… her metamorphosis from hospital assistant to hostess is startling."[156] Although she is the person who has the most direct contacts with men in this play, she shows the

[154] Gems, Pam. *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi: A Play*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1977, p.5.
[155] Ibid., 4.
[156] Ibid., 4.

least interest or concern for them. She is less involved in the women's community and is less judgmental in her attitudes towards both men and women. She succeeds in saving enough money to pursue her dreams for an education.

Fish is the central character of the play. Although there is no protagonist in the strictly classical sense, Fish's character is the most fully developed. She is an energetic woman who is active in the socialist movement. Gems describes Fish: "she has all the natural authority and self-confidence of the upper-middle classes. She is intelligent and from an intellectual background… she is warm, passionate and caring, and searching with every bit of courage for the now."[157] In politics, Fish is an avid fan of Rosa Luxemburg and demonstrates that in her talks. In one example, she delivers a long lecture about Rosa to her comrades:

> Rosa was actually taking part in the German uprising… organizing, writing, speaking on the run. She saw what the workers could do. She saw them take over the factories, re-organize jobs to spread work and wage fairly… she saw that it took the unemployed to know about being unemployed. And she saw the new organizations growing spontaneously… without bosses, without do-gooders… even revolutionary do-gooders. She was not an anarcho-syndicalist… and she shared Lenin's own suspicions about the end of the road of trade unionism. Nonetheless, nonetheless right up to her death she believed fiercely… that the mistakes made by the masses creating their own revolution were

[157] Ibid., 4.

> far more valuable than any theory coming from central committee. The French revolution, remember, was taken away from the people by middle-class terrorists.[158]

Fish is herself successful in leftist politics; however, her relationship with Alan, her Marxist boyfriend, is fraught with difficulties. The relationship consumes all her energy and leaves her broken down. Ironically, Alan, who introduced Fish to Marxist socialism, leaves her to marry another girl who is more traditionally subservient. Fish's story echoes that of Rosa Luxemburg, a woman who was essentially disappointed by her political male partner. Fish, an iconic mother figure for her community, cannot find a way to confront this dilemma and commits suicide.

Scholar Michelene Wandor writes that "no significant decisions about how to realize a play on stage can be made before the play is understood, and the source for that is the text, the cultural sources to which it refers, and then the text again."[159] Accordingly, to understand this play we should consider its original context. *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* was written in 1976, some years after the Women's Movement began and one year after the Sex Discrimination Act was passed. For the younger generation, the conflicts and tensions in the first reading of *Dusa* might be simply the personal struggles of the individual characters, born out of their private lives. However, when one studies the play in its primary context of production, a new reading is possible. Nancy Meckler recalls:

> A young director that I know was asked to direct a reading of *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* and she said to me "Oh, I can't get on with

[158] Ibid, 17.

[159] Wandor, Michelene. *Post-war British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*. London: Routledge, 2001, p.6.

> this play at all and I don't understand that speech she has about Rosa Luxemburg." And you know this was a woman in her thirties and she didn't get it. And I thought "Oh what a pity" because if I directed the reading, maybe I could make it clear to people how the play works and what its impact was. It was so much of its time that now maybe what it's saying seems a bit cliché. So, maybe you have to wait for a period when people are more interested in looking back and saying "Is that what it was like?"[160]

Gems' play is a consideration of women's situation in the first half of the 70s. It raises crucial questions pertinent to 70s' feminist culture: in a society that is male-orientated, can women survive without male participation? How far can women support each other within women's groups? In a society that is slow to accept women as equals, what are the best modes of advocacy? How to address the challenges of balancing public and private lives? How does motherhood block women's progress? It was during this period, as Janelle Reinelt writes, that "Radical feminists had theorized a trans-historical subjection of women to men in the patriarchy as the central problem and fact of reality. This view encouraged socialist women to abandon alliances with men, even for purposes of class struggles; men were seen as the fundamental enemy, regardless of class affiliation."[161] It seems Gems, in this play, is trying to give a heads up to women and deflate any illusions created by separatist political ideology. The play is a microcosm of

[160] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

[161] Reinelt, Janelle, "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama." *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. Ed. Helene Keyssar. New York: St. Martin's, 1996, p. 37.

Gems' critique of the contemporary patriarchal hegemony. Her women break down the conventional social structures by building up a women's community. Her characters learn to take responsibility for their actions and to tackle socio-political issues. They peel off their old skins to be reborn, but they must pay the cost. Gems not only criticizes men for restricting women throughout history, but also questions women for their separatist acts. She wrote: "The question of feminism does tend to divide us rather than unite us, which is sad. But there is hope. I used to play devil's advocate in the days when 'feminism' tended to mean, or at least include, some degree of man-hating."[162]

The only character that is unable to achieve her goals is Fish, the central role who is associated with the feminist movement. This element aroused various controversies at its time of production. Fish is the person who provides a place for women and encourages them to make a group. However, as the play progresses she becomes more self-absorbed and less mindful of other women. She cannot decide on whether she wants to fill the conventional role of a woman by marrying and raising children, or become a new independent woman, based on contemporary feminist concerns, who sacrifices her personal life for her social and political success, as Marlene does in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. Contrary to what Keyssar calls "the absence of deceit and manipulation"[163] in *Dusa*'s women's community, Fish does in fact lie to her friends on multiple occasions to keep them out of her comfort zone. When Dusa wants Fish to open up to her about her relationship with Alan, she quickly evades the question by saying that she has begun a

[162] Goodman, Lizbeth, and Gay J. De. *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, p.31.

[163] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984, p.133.

new relationship with another man and ends the conversation. She also invents a story for her friends about Alan following her. While Fish's dishonesty does not directly harm the other members of the group, it makes her an unreliable leader. It is this aspect of Fish's personality that makes her flat-mates feel that their relationship with Fish is not based on mutual honesty. Dusa reproaches Fish for this: "I get the notion that you're keeping an eye on me. It's unnerving… It's just that when I think you're trying to … look after me, it gives me ugly thoughts."[164]

Another reason for Fish's maladjustment in her community of sisterhood is her class. As Janelle Reinelt wrote, "in England, the feminist movement is at once largely working-class and heavily socialist, in contrast with America where feminism is strongly based in the middle class."[165] Fish, like Rosa Luxemburg, is from an upper-middle-class family and does not fit within a working-class group. In *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International*, Richard Abraham described Luxemburg as "from a degree of intellectual snobbery, avoiding direct contact with the daily lives of working people and entirely failing to comprehend the Eastern European peasantry.[166] Fish tries to be part of the working-class socialist movement, but because of her class, is not accepted by them. In an interview with Lizbeth Goodman, Gems mentioned: "I come from the lower working class and I have all the class loyalty that I don't see in the middle class."[167] This

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[164] Gems, Pam. *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi: A Play*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1977, p. 33.

[165] Reinelt, Janelle, "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama." *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. Ed. Helene Keyssar. New York: St. Martin's, 1996, p. 36.

[166] Abraham, Richard. *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, p. 4.

[167] Goodman, Lizbeth, and Gay J. De. *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996, p. 30.

idiosyncrasy is present in the play when Stas, speaking with Vi, criticizes Fish's political commitment:

> STAS. Upper class twit, they're always the worst.
>
> VI. Shut up . . .
>
> STAS. [You've] fallen for it.
>
> VI. What?
>
> STAS. The charm. Lady Fucking Bountiful . . . Forty-hour week revolutionaries . . . then it's country house time. Makes you sick.
>
> VI. I'm not jealous of her.
>
> STAS. Well, I am.
>
> VI. What for?
>
> STAS. I wanna be rich.
>
> VI. Yeah? What about the workers?
>
> STAS. I am the workers.[168]

Stas even goes further and calls Fish "Mrs. Pankhurst,"[169] referring to the Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), the British leader of suffrage movement. Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters were initially part of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS); however, they splintered off the NUWSS to establish the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and became famous as suffragettes. This organization, as Sheila Stowell points out, "offered feminists a new militant image that

[168] Gems, Pam. *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi: A Play*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1977, p. 18.
[169] Ibid., 26.

helped to spur women of all classes, talents, and occupations to renew political and social action."[170] Unlike working-class suffragists, suffragettes were mostly from upper and middle classes. By referring to Fish as Mrs. Pankhurst, Stas is separating her from the main body of the socialist movement. As Michelene Wandor maintained, "Fish's middle-class origins condemn her as a woman, making it impossible for her to find solidarity with other women."[171]

Fish sees her commitment to politics as depriving her of her happy life. She articulates this by comparing her life with that of Luxemburg's: "Rosa never married Leo. She never had the child she longed for. The painful hopes in the letters from prison were never to be realized."[172] There is a conflict between Fish's socialist desires and her personal wishes. It is true that all women of this play are victims of a larger malfunctioning system; yet, Gems reminds us that women also have a responsibility for this. Fish's disorientation in life is not irrelevant to her class-biased views in politics. She articulates this in a dialogue with Dusa:

> Fish: It's the politics. I don't think he can take it.
>
> Dusa: What do you mean, it was because of him you-
>
> Fish: Oh, Ok while I was learning … sticking stamps on. I'm a better speaker than he is. He's a good organizer, but I'm a better speaker.[173]

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[170] Stowell, Sheila. *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, p.1.

[171] Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 166.

[172] Gems, Pam. *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi: A Play*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1977, p. 17.

[173] Ibid., 12.

Gems coated her arguments for moderation in politics with her celebration of parenthood. She explores images of maternity in this play: Dusa is a mother who wants to reunite with her two children. At the same time, Gems shows that because of her children, she could not work and was financially dependent on her ex-husband. In this case, marriage mirrors women's subordination in a sexist society. However, financial insecurity does not force her to withdraw from her feelings of motherhood. She explains: "I wish I was a cat or a horse. I'd have one [baby] a year. Well after you've had a couple your body wants to go on. It's got the hang of it."[174] At the end she both finds a job and retrieves her children. On the other end of the spectrum, Vi hates children and makes traumatic jokes about babies and pregnancy. She recalls her abortion: "I was seven months. It was ever so strong… you could hear it crying all the way to the incinerator."[175] Fish wishes to have a child but like Betty Friedan she thinks that "the inequality of woman, her second-class status in society, was in historical reality linked to that biological state of motherhood."[176] Fish believes that parenthood makes her subordinate to men. However, she finally accepts that her problems with Alan were caused by her gender-related dilemmas: "We should have a child! ... I should have done it last autumn, we both wanted it then."[177] Gems explained:

> I wanted to write about women now, women in their twenties who would almost certainly be mothers but for the pill. I do think that when the pill came in it was fantastic, now we can have the phallic

[174] Ibid., 12.
[175] Ibid., 9.
[176] Friedan, Betty. *The Second Stage*. New York: Summit Books, 1981, p. 77.
[177] Ibid., 12.

> freedoms to screw where and when we want. But there is also the chemical and existential mutation. I wanted to show some women as they are now, against mechanized urban backgrounds, isolated in eyries, breeding sometimes, more often divorced than their mothers, reacting against modern commercial brutality by becoming anorexic, [self-starvation] a female disease which is rejection of sexuality. Women who are the pathfinders of the new breed, trying to live the revolution with their fellers, and so often getting knocked back in what is still so inexorably a man's world.[178]

Unlike Dusa, Stas, and Vi who become able to make balance between their personal and public lives, Fish is unable to stabilize herself and puts an end to her life. Scholar Helene Keyssar sees Fish's suicide as "a powerful reminder to the audience of the limitations of individual effort and the insufficiency of the liberation of women as a separatist endeavor."[179] Gems herself in the afterword for the play justifies Fish's suicide:

> I am not a writer of polemic, which I believe belongs to the platform… The reason for Fish's decision not to live was the failure of love. The antagonism between the sexes has been painful, an indictment of our age… We cannot separate ourselves.

[178] In an interview with Michelene Wandor, "Women are Uncharted Territory", *Spare Rib*, September 1977. p.13

[179] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1984, p.134.

> Many of us know that all we have, as Gandhi said, against the Hardware, is the strength of our spirits… and love.

One controversy spurred by the play was that Fish's character was based on the British director Buzz Goodbody (1946-1975) who committed suicide one year before the production. Goodbody joined the Communist Party when she was only fifteen. Later she became involved in the Women's Movement, where she helped found the Britain's first feminist theatre company, The Women's Street Theatre Group[180]. Graduated from University of Sussex, Goodbody soon became known for her experimental work, especially for her direction of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Buzz joined the RSC in 1967 as a personal assistant for John Barton who was the associate director of this company. In 1969, she officially started her work as an assistant director for the RSC and became the first woman to direct for this company. Contradictory for the RSC at the time, Goodbody, as Dympna Callaghan observes, pushed Shakespeare "to the cultural margins of society"[181] to make it more accessible to people who could not afford expensive seats. To fulfill her wishes in attracting new audiences, she decided to experiment with contemporizing Shakespeare's plays. To this end, she requested the RSC's administrators to open a studio theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. In 1974, The Other Place was opened and Goodbody became its artistic director. For some time, the RSC's administrators and Goodbody were not certain about the outcome of this new

[180] The first production of this group was *Sugar and Spice* in 1971.

[181] Callaghan, Dympna. "Aesthetics and Marginality: The Theatre of Joan Littlewood and Buzz Goodbody." *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics*. Ed. Karen Louis Laughlin and Catherine Schuler. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995, p. 273.

small theatre, so they did not invite press to review their early shows.[182] But in less than a few months The Other Place became one of the powerhouses of the experimental theatres in Britain and opened its door to contemporary plays as well as classical works. At The Other Place Goodbody directed the abridged version of *King Lear* (1975) and a modern-dress production of *Hamlet* (1975). The success of The Other Place made RSC's administrators establish a small studio theatre, The Warehouse, in London as well.

In April 1975, at the age of 28 she committed suicide by overdosing with sleeping pills. There is no exact account of why Goodbody committed suicide. Colin Chambers believes that Goodbody "was haunted by the memory of finding the body of an actor on the RSC tour of Australia who had committed suicide, and by a dream of smashing into a tree after a high-speed car ride. The suicide of the RSC's youngest and only woman director was a willed act, planned some time beforehand."[183] People who were close to Goodbody like Pam Gems believed that Goodbody's divorce had a traumatic impact on her and led her to commit suicide. *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* obviously supports this hypothesis.

Gems and Goodbody worked with each other ever since the Women's Festival at the Almost Free Theatre. Goodbody was a role model for many women who were fighting against sexism and were trying to open doors to higher positions in the theatre industry. Gems recalled: "Buzz was our icon. She had been to stay with me at our house on the Isle of Wight. She had this bright, definite manner. There was no indication of what she was obviously going through. It was fatigue. Your mind starts to give you false

[182] For more on this please see Chambers, Collin. *Other Spaces, New Theatre and the RSC*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980, p. 39.
[183] Ibid., p. 14.

signals. She was a great loss. The fall-out was not good."[184] When Gems in *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* made Fish resemble Goodbody in her suicide as well as in character, both associated with the left-wing, it raised eyebrows at the time. However, despite its controversial ending, the play was a huge success and received good reviews.

In my interview with the director Nancy Meckler in 2015, she observed: "I remember the actresses saying to me, not long ago, that when they were performing in that play everybody came to see it. It was like every celebrity who came to London had to go and see *Dusa, Fish, Stas, & Vi*, and I think it was something to do with the fact that it was this sort of insight into a female world which felt original."[185] The reviewer Irving Wardle praised the play as "the best written and most penetrating new feminist piece that has come my way, richly deserving its transfer from Hampstead."[186] Susan Carlson described it as a play exploring "the uncharted dramatic possibilities of multiple female heroines."[187] Reviewer John Peter wrote that "the play pulsates with humanity. The writing has both warmth and uncompromising toughness… a sense of character which captures the nuances of self-deception, exhilaration or misery. Her cast are perfectly at home in her world."[188] Michael Billington described Gems' writing "without being either

[184] Rees, Roland. 1992. *Fringe first: pioneers of fringe theatre on record*. London: Oberon Books, p. 199.

[185] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

[186] Wardle, Irving. "Four drop-outs from the cat race." *Times*, 11 February 1977, p. 9.

[187] Carlson, Susan. "Process and Product: Contemporary British Theatre and Its Communities of Women." *Theatre Research International*. 13.3 (1988), p. 255-56.

[188] Peter, John. "Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi." *The Sunday Times*, 12 December 1976, p. 35.

shrill or freakish… tells it like it is."[189] Ted Whitehead proclaimed "it's reasonable to expect (designed, acted, costumed, directed by women) that such a production will tell us something about what women are thinking today, and I have an awful fear that it does."[190] Michael Coveney wrote that "if the West End can have its plays about middle-class marital tribulations there is certainly room for so fresh and accurately written a piece as this. Not since David Hare's *Slag* have we seen a play that really digs into the lives of women living together and, although Pam Gems is enormously flattered by the brilliance of Nancy Meckler's direction, there is no denying the tough urgency of what she has to say about girls under one roof."[191] Jack Tinker described the play as "a bitter, brilliant comedy as delicately incisive as a surgeon's scalpel, it wounds without crude bloodshed."[192] However, Benedict Nightingale found the reason behind the play confusing: "I believed in Miss Gems's characters, though I wasn't sure of her purpose in introducing them to us."[193] Also some feminist critics found it difficult to digest Fish's suicide. Michelene Wandor saw an element of defeat implied in Fish's suicide.[194] Sarah J. Rudolph found the Fish's suicide as "the death of a naiveté about change in men and women's relationship."[195] In contrast, Helene Keyssar wrote that Fish's suicide is not "a cynical or defeatist gesture but a powerful reminder to the audience of the limitations of

[189] Billington, Michael. "First Night." *The Guardian*, 11 February 1977.
[190] Whitehead, Ted. "Theatre Review." *The Spectator*, 18 December 1976.
[191] Coveney, Michael. "Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi." *Financial Times*, 9 December. 1976, p. 3.
[192] Tinker, Jack. "Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi." *Daily Mail*, 14 February 1977, p. 26.
[193] Nightingale, Benedict. "Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi." *New Statesman*, 17 Dec. 1976.
[194] Please see Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 164.
[195] Rudolph, Sarah J. *Revisioning Women's Lives Through Drama: The Plays of Pam Gems*. Dissertation. The University of Wisconsin, 1991, p. 109.

individual effort and the insufficiency of the liberation of women as a separatist endeavor."[196]

The success of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* helped Gems' reputation go beyond women's theatre groups and began establishing her as a major player in British theatre. Soon after this play, she received commissions from major subsidized theatre companies in England such as the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre. Her small casts and productions began to grow bigger and accordingly attracted more national and international attentions. As will be discussed in next chapter, her productions also began to bring national and international awards for Gems and her casts.

[196] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. New York: Grove Press, 1985, p. 134.

Chapter 4: Bridging the Gap Between Alternative and Mainstream Theatre

After the successful production of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1976) in the West End, Gems received a commission from Ann Jellico, the literary manager for the Royal Court at the time, to write a play for their large downstairs stage. Gems wrote *Queen Christina* (1977), a play on the life of this Swedish queen. Shortly after, however, Nicholas Wright and Robert Kidd[197] replaced Jellico and decided the play was "too sprawly! Too expensive to do and anyway it would appeal more to women,"[198] and rejected it on these grounds. The play was subsequently produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place. Actress Sheila Allen (1932-2011), who was married to one of the RSC's directors and associates, David Jones (1934-2008), recommended the play to Ron Daniels, who was the artistic director of The Other place at the time. *Queen Christina* became the first work by a woman playwright to be produced at the male-dominated RSC.

Queen Christina (1626-1689) was the only child of King Gustav II Adolf (1694-1632) and Queen Maria Eleonora (1599-1655) to survive infancy. Her father raised her as if she was a boy to succeed him on the throne. She was proclaimed queen after her father's death in 1632. As Christina was only six at his death, the country was governed by a regency (1632-1644) until she reached adulthood. Ruling over Sweden during the

[197] Between 1975 and 1977, Nicholas Wright (1940-) and Robert Kidd (1943-1980) worked as joint artistic directors of Royal Court Theatre and designed a new writing program for it.

[198] Wandor, Michelene. "Women Are Uncharted Territory," *Spare Rib*, September 1977, 12.

final years of the Thirty Years' War[199], Christina abdicated in 1654, converted to Catholicism, and left for Rome to meet the Pope. The dramatic literature on Christina is as prominent as her own history as a queen. The modern representation of Christina differs from other historical dramas in its depiction of a woman taking center stage in a patriarchal world, but being only very incidentally affected by other women. Importantly the only woman who compares with Christina is English: Queen Elizabeth I of England, known as the Virgin Queen and who also refused to have a child, and thus an heir to the throne. Gems' play introduces the British public to another royal woman who had a similar story.

August Strindberg was the first playwright who dramatized the life of this queen in his *Kristina* in 1901[200]. Twentieth century Swedish studies "had concentrated almost exclusively on Christina's abdication and its relation to her conversion to Catholicism,"[201] and Strindberg's play is no exception to this. *Kristina* was criticized as "a scandalous historical masquerade"[202] that manipulated the image of Queen Christina,

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[199] These European wars of religion (1618-1648) involved nearly every European country. Political ambitions and commercial interests ignited the potential fire between Protestantism and Catholicism. Sweden in 1630 – under the reign of Gustav II Adolf – entered the war and, by the end, asserted herself as one of the most powerful nations on the continent - recognized as the leader of Protestantism.

[200] Strindberg is mostly known for his naturalistic and expressionistic plays like *The Father* (1887), *Miss Julie* (1888), and *A Dream Play* (1907). However, it is noteworthy that he composed twenty-three historical plays that are less acknowledged in books and anthologies. *Kristina* is one of his historical plays, which despite its paucity in print had successful runs in both Scandinavian and German theatres.

[201] Marie-Louise Rodén, *Church Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome: Cardinal Decio Azzolino, Queen Christina of Sweden, and the Squadrone Volante.* Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000. p. 15.

[202] Lamm. Martin. *August Strindberg*, ed. and trans. by Harry G. Carlson, New York: B Blom, 1971, p. 210.

which, in later years, was best exemplified in Greta Garbo in Rouben Mamoulian's 1938 film (*Queen Christina*). Beyond mythologizing the image of Christina, both of these works provided inaccurate accounts for Christina's abdication: Strindberg introduced Christina as an inept queen who could not properly rule her country. Her political incapability, plus her squandering of public funds in lavish balls, raised social discontents and ultimately forced her to resign. Mamoulian also set the queen in a context of socio-political unrest, however, benefiting from the stellar image of Greta Garbo, he romanticized the story and counted Christina's affair with the Spanish emissary Don Antonio Pimentelli as the reason of her abdication.

Seventy-five years after Strindberg, Gems offered her own version of Queen Christina from a female perspective. Gems' play undercut the misogyny of Strindberg's play and provided a more accurate historical account of her life's trajectory. Unlike Strindberg, who abruptly situates Christina in a setting of societal discontent, Gems provides historical exposition for the queen and focuses on her education and explores the reasons of her conversion to Catholicism as well as what happens to her after abdication. The play opens with King Gustav and his Chancellor Axel Oxentjerna discussing Christina, who is only six years old at the time. After hearing the unfortunate news of his stillborn son, the king decides to bring up Christina as a boy - and a potential successor – that surprises his chancellor:

> KING: We do have an heir. (*Gestures the child*)
>
> AXEL: A girl.
>
> KING: She's fit enough. Intelligent.

AXEL: But the wrong sex! With a weak succession it'll be anybody's game, we can't have a woman.

KING: Make a man of her then.

AXEL: How?

KING: Training.[203]

King Gustav orders the chancellor to draft the legislation for this act and bestows the responsibility of Christina's education on him. He emphasizes Christina must be brought up "fit, educated, and able to lead an army if necessary."[204] Before leaving for a battle[205], the king provides Christina with three pieces of advice: first, to comply with the chancellor's instructions, then "not to fidget in church" as they "mustn't upset the Lutherans," and, lastly, to look after her mother, as "she's a woman."[206] Christina is then taken from her mother and handed over to the chancellor while the young Christina hears the discussion and cries throughout the scene.

The second scene jumps forward twenty years and Christina is an adult, trying to get used to her role as queen. Axel Oxentjerna and the German Prince are waiting for her to come back from her morning hunt. A beautiful woman enters the stage along with a "slightly crippled" man in hunting clothes and "a swiveled, crooked appearance."[207] The prince, enchanted by the woman's beauty, "smiles in delight"[208] and kisses the woman's

[203] Gems, Pam. *Queen Christina: A Play in Two Acts*. London: St. Luke's, 1982, p. 1.
[204] Ibid., 2.
[205] Refers to the Battle of Lutzen wherein Gustav II Adolf was killed on November 6, 1632.
[206] Gems, *Queen Christina,* p. 3.
[207] Ibid., 5.
[208] Ibid., 5.

hand. Putting his hand on the woman's shoulder, the man asks, "who the hell's this?"[209] affronting the prince who, agitated, draws his sword. Axel intercedes and introduces the prince to the man:

> AXEL: (Through his teeth) It's the royal suitor!
>
> MAN: At least there's some spunk in him. (He thumps the prince genially on the shoulder, sending him reeling, then turns to Axel with a murderous face) Some sort of joke?
>
> AXEL: You've been fully aware of the negotiations.
>
> MAN: And you are developing a sense of humor?[210]

Then the Man "takes the Prince's nerveless arm and stands beside him in a wifely stance. Even Axel masks a momentary smile."[211] It is then that the German Prince realizes that the Man is indeed Queen Christina and the woman with her is only her maid Ebba Sparre. This betrothal scene is central to Gems' play as it highlights fundamental features of Christina's character. The grown-up Christina is not a romanticized girl with childish manners, someone that Strindberg offers. Here, Christina is a strong lady who identifies with men both in character and in appearance. She wears male outfits and uses strong language. She hunts every morning before breakfast, carries a sword, and intimidates men. Her attitude towards her chancellor, Oxentjerna, is tough and unflagging. Rather than beautifying the queen as a majestic character, Gems presents Christina as a crippled personage with a crooked appearance who is not afraid of getting

[209] Ibid., 5.
[210] Ibid., 6.
[211] Ibid., 6.

engaged in daily matters.[212] However, Christina is concurrently conscious about her female sex. Despite her arrogance and manly manner, she is not ashamed to grab her abdomen and groan "My bloody period"[213] when the time comes. With these dramaturgical choices, Gems stresses her individualism rather than making her an object of male desire. By creating the absurd image of Christina and the Prince standing next to one another, Gems foreshadows Christina's difficulties in matching a partner.

Christina's relationships with men are complicated, and her female relationships are not much better. The only woman whom she can literally tolerate is her maid, Ebba (Belle), with whom she shares intense homoerotic feelings despite Ebba's serious relationship with the Lord Treasurer Magnus de la Gardi. One point of similarity between Gems and Strindberg is that they both initially introduce Christina as a misogynist. Strindberg introduces her as a "woman-hater"[214] who avoids women, especially her mother, as she believes women are not reasonable beings and have no useful advice for her.[215] Her attitude towards women remains unchanged for much of the play. Gems elaborates on this attitude of Christina and clarifies that her distance from women is not because she finds them unreasonable but because she has not yet discovered their world. As the play unfolds, Christina comes to know the women's world more deeply, and she begins to relate to them. In the final scene, when she is hospitalized at the Roman court, she is nursed by a woman, Lucia, who has a small girl, Angelica. Through interactions

[212] In the same scene, Gems clarifies that when Christina was a child, she was dropped by her nurse, crippling her.

[213] Ibid., 7.

[214] Strindberg, August. *Kristina, Charles XII, Gustav III*, Strindberg, August. Translation and introduction by Walter Johnson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955. p. 49.

[215] See Strindberg, *Kristina, Charles XII, Gustav III*, p. 33.

with them, Christina develops a passion for women and children. Geraldine Cousin writes,

> Of a similar age to Christina in the first scene of the play, and like her, at that point, carrying a doll, Angelica serves as an echo of the child that existed prior to the construction of Christina as man. Angelica feeds sweets to her doll and then puts one into Christina's mouth. When Christina makes no move to swallow it, Angelica gives her a little slap and tells her to eat it and to stop being naughty. As if the nursery language reminds her of the long-ago child that was herself, Christina responds for the first time in the scene.[216]

In another instance, Angelica is choking and it is Christina who rushes out from her room to the kitchen to save her life. Prior to this rescue she had not left her room for days and this sudden act sparks a change in her: "How flimsy rank is. In human need, it dissolves at once. So warm down there! The smell of ironed clothes… linen… lace… food… baking… And babies. The smell of babies. I like the smell of babies – can that be wrong?"[217] Angelica, as her name annotates[218], acts as a little angel to heal Christina's sick spirit by reminding her of her own childhood and dragging her out of a deep depression and solitude into a woman's space: the kitchen.

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[216] Cousin, Geraldine. *Women in Dramatic Place and Time: Contemporary Female Characters on Stage*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 156.

[217] Ibid., 72.

[218] The name Angelica is derived from the medieval Latin *Angelic* (an aromatic herb), which was believed to be efficacious against poisoning and disease.

> CHRISTINA: I was bred as a man despising the weakness of women … how wrong I have been in condemning women for their weakness… they have kept us alive! … No, no more killing. I begin to perceive I am a woman. What that is, heaven knows… the philosophy yet to be written, there is a world to be explored… I never saw the nature of it. Women submit, not from weakness, but for love… I have been betrayed. This [*she slaps her abdomen*] has been betrayed.[219]

With this statement, Christina reconsiders her gender identity. Despite her royal education and life experience following her abdication, she admits to a lack of knowledge about what it means to be a woman. But it is more than that: she feels betrayed by her life, a life in which she learned to denigrate women as a matter of course.

After revising Strindberg's characterization of Christina, Gems deals with the reasons for her abdication. Christina abdicates the throne not because she is forced to, but because she is finished with being manipulated by men. Being raised as a male, the council requires her to marry for the sole reason of having an heir to the Swedish throne. Christina's conversation with the Lord Chancellor reveals how much she feels humiliated by this request:

> AXEL: Your unique position demands both the manly qualities of a king, and the fecundity of a woman.
>
> CHRISTINA: Well you can't *have* both.
>
> AXEL: Why not? For twenty years I've prepared you for it.

[219] Ibid., 74-75.

> CHRISTINA: And how? By making a man of me. A man, despising women – just like you. You've had your joke, you and nature between you.[220]

Christina goes against the conventional roles expected from women and finally obliges the court and the church to accept "somebody else to breed the tribe."[221] However, there is one more reason for the abdication of Christina that is grounded in historical accounts: she is in the process of converting to Catholicism, due to the influence of the French ambassador, Chanut. His larger vision is to turn Sweden into a Catholic state, and Christina is merely a means to that end. As a first step, he convinces Christina not to sign "an edict that bans the [Catholic] mass."[49] She accordingly forces Axel to pacify the council about the "mass" edict as she sees the Catholic countries as their allies. Christina's disaffection with Lutheranism began from her childhood. As prescribed by the ceremonies for her father's death, she was obliged to attend excruciatingly long Lutheran sermons. One of Christina's biographers, Georgina Masson explains:

> The never-ending sermons and discourses to which a lively child such as Christina was forced to listen in mourning for her father, from the time she was six until she was nearly eight, aroused in her a loathing for this very prominent aspect of Lutheran worship. She

[220] Ibid., 33.
[221] Ibid., 37.

> also acquired a life-long dislike for the extravagance, in all senses of the word, of Swedish funeral customs.[222]

Christina's initial contacts with the Roman Church, as Marie-Louise Rodén suggests, "had been made through secret communication with the Jesuit order. This secrecy was an utter necessity, for the religious statutes accepted in Orebro in 1617 had sharpened existing strictures against Catholicism in Sweden considerably."[223] In addition to Jesuits and Chanut, Christina's interest in Descartes was influential in her pursuit of Catholicism. Masson observes:

> By his [Chanut's] own account, she [Christina] was interested to find that the Roman Catholic faith was very different from what she had been led to believe. Then came the encounter with Descartes which had together with his works made Christina realize that this man who was one of the most daring thinkers of his time was nevertheless a believing Catholic.[224]

Following Christina's abdication, Gems tracks her adventures after she leaves Sweden. Christina heads to Rome to see the Pope, but on her way, she visits the Blue Stockings in France. The term 'blue stocking' refers to an informal British social and educational movement of women in the mid-18th century. Similar to French salonists, these women held literary and intellectual discussions in their homes. Gems suggests that Christina met the members of this society in Paris, however, historical records do not

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[222] Masson, Georgina. *Queen Christina*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969. p. 31.

[223] Marie-Louise Rodén. *Church Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome: Cardinal Decio Azzolino, Queen Christina of Sweden, and the Squadrone Volante*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000, 119.

[224] Masson, *Queen Christina*, 147.

mention such a meeting. The time frame is anachronistic as Christina lived a century earlier. Nevertheless, Gems' uses these British women as a means for Christina to encounter a group of well-educated women. Christina discovers the radical agenda of these knowledgeable women when they declare they have removed men from their daily lives:

> CHRISTINA: What about sex though, don't you miss it?
>
> MARQUISE: As your majesty knows, men have not the exclusive rights to our bodies.
>
> CHRISTINA: Oh, you mean you are together? Jolly good.
>
> CATHERINE: To submit to men is treachery to our cause. The enemy must be attacked, does Your Majesty not agree?
>
> CHRISTINA: To be honest, the word enemy chills my liver after thirty years at war…[225]

Christina finds these women intriguing and in many ways sympathizes with them, but as a Catholic she opposes their views on abortion. Discouraged by their radical beliefs, she leaves Paris to continue her journey to Rome. In Rome, Christina meets the Pope and Cardinal Azzolino, who welcome "such a loving heart"[226] to their city. However, it does not take long for both sides to see that they have major points of disagreements. Christina is in search of the "meaning of meaning… of life, light, and the new astronomy."[227] She jokes with the Pope about confessions and tells him that she

[225] Gems, *Queen Christina*, 47.
[226] Ibid., 50.
[227] Ibid., 51.

"whored" her way across Europe! Behind this coarse male-like joke lies a different meaning, as her response to the Pope's offer of a confession makes clear:

> CHRISTINA: Oh I don't repent. Best time I ever had in my life… that's something we're going to have to put right in your religion. Celibacy's no good – not in the Bible, you know. Think again… no need to cut it off, Pope![228]

During this meeting Christina finds out that Pope is the same as other men in his biased expectations of women in terms of modesty and self-effacement. The Pope finds Christina's opinions "near blasphemy."[229] To get rid of her, he offers Christina the crown of Naples which is embroiled in conflict. She accepts and is successful in managing Naples. She discovers, however, that a man who she has fallen in love with, her servant Monaldescho, is a spy and cuts his throat. This traumatic event sears itself into her mind and drags Christina into the depths of depression.

By bringing Christina's personal and political selves together, Gems depicts the struggle between her role as a national head of state and her deeply-held beliefs and desires, complicated further by her attraction to the Catholic faith. Christina is divided between a female yearning of motherhood and the male 'will to power'. Gems believed in the fundamental necessity of reclaiming Christina's history from a female perspective. Even her interest in Greta Garbo (1905-1990), as will be discussed in the next chapter, did not stop Gems to deconstruct the myth of Christina as an attractive, flirtatious queen who enjoyed exercising power to achieve her own desires. Also, she does not miss a

[228] Ibid., 51.
[229] Ibid., 55.

chance to articulate her critique of the patriarchy to provide her with a means of addressing the position of women in the twentieth century. One key scene is in Act I, Scene IV, during the conversation between Axel and Christina's mother;

> AXEL: You never understood the nature of war economy.
>
> MOTHER: And when should I have learned that – I was pregnant for fifteen years.
>
> AXEL: Precisely.
>
> MOTHER: The women of this country don't need to understand theory. They are too busy keeping their families alive against the day you expose them to the sword.
>
> AXEL: You spit in the shield that defends you.
>
> MOTHER: You? Defend *US*?
>
> AXEL: Who else?
>
> MOTHER: The Queen! My daughter! Who's taking us out of this war? Not you![230]

Here the queen's mother argues that women are indoctrinated into passive roles assigned to them by men. One such mandate is pregnancy, the well-known biological imperative to reproduce, which Gems brings up to link with the 1970's women's issues. This topic was much discussed in the decade of the 70's when Gems wrote this play. As I noted in the previous chapter, a variety of differing opinions on the topic co-existed ranging from radical feminists who entirely opposed heteronormative wedlock to more liberal feminists who did not totally abandon matrimony. Gems, as a mother four,

[230] Ibid., 23.

promoted the latter approach and *Queen Christina* testifies to this. Gems shows the audience how Christina's ambivalence – from when she hears about Ebba's pregnancy – develops as a passionate yearning to have a child. When Christina meets Ebba for the first time after her marriage, she learns about her pregnancy and revolts: "Get out. I will not have pregnant cows under my roof."[231] But gradually she adjusts her attitude and says: "Can you feel it, does it move?"[232] As examined above, by the end of the play there is no perceivable sign of hatred about motherhood remaining in Christina.

Beyond writing a role intended for a woman to having a major, complicated character to play, Gems wanted a woman director. Penny Cherns was chosen for this job. Cherns recalls, "Pam insisted or suggested or demanded - I don't know what she did (laughs) but one of them - that there should be a woman director. And then I think it was between a couple of us, and we had interviews and then I was offered the production."[233] Cherns encountered various antagonisms during this production process. Some of the company's male actors were not happy to act in the supporting roles of the play. For the first time in the RSC's history, a woman had a leading role. Cherns explains: "I'd just found it quite funny that I was accused of being ferociously organized by letting people know when they were going to be called and so on. I have no memory of whether I overdid it or not. This actor also seemed to have a difficult relationship with Sheila Allen."[234] Against all the internal challenges of the production, audiences enjoyed the

[231] Ibid., 36.
[232] Ibid., 37.
[233] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Three Women in One Frame: Pam Gems, Penny Cherns, and Christina of Sweden." *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Volume 28 (issue 4).
[234] Ibid.

play. Penny Cherns recalls: "it was received as a thoroughly good story, cracking good story. The audience seemed to enjoy it very much including members of the company who came to see it, some members of the artistic directorship at the time."[235] However, the critics reviewed the play differently. Sally Aire appreciated the first half of the play, but she believed "the 'European' second half that the narrative line of the play weakens, becomes confused, tedious and seems to betray its own first half."[236] John Peter claimed that Gems "has fallen into the same trap as Strindberg... who tried to cram a broad sense of history and a picture of a tormented soul into one frame." Simultaneously he praised Gems: "actually, her play is better than Strindberg's because the Swede was, as usual, being both vindictive and soppy about women, whereas she writes with humor, compassion, and intelligence."[237] Benedict Nightingale wrote that "Gems had little time for Garboesque cooings and meltings; but I'm not sure her version will please the severe liberationists. She is, for instance, unimpressed by the 'bluestockings' of her periods, women upon whom feminist theory has foisted a dry, passionless loathing of the men they are mindlessly mimicking."[238] However, scholar Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire saw "the production of this play itself as indicative of changes in the approach to 'women's theatre' by the Establishment."[239]

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[235] Ibid.

[236] Aire, Sally. "Queen Christina." *Plays and Players*, December 1977, p.31.

[237] Peter, John. "A Woman's Face." *The Sunday Times*, 18 September 1977, p. 35.

[238] Nightingale, Benedict. "Queen Christina." *New Statesman*. 94 (1977). p. 376.

[239] Bassnet-McGuire, Susan. "Towards A Theory of Women's Theatre," in *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984, p. 451.

Despite the mixed reviews, the Royal Shakespeare Company continued to work with Gems, producing five more of her plays: *Piaf* (1978), *Guinevere*[240] (1979), *Camille* (1984), *The Danton Affair* (1986), and *The Blue Angel* (1991). This induced the other major subsidized theatre in Britain, the Royal National Theatre, to acknowledge Gems as a major playwright. The RNT commissioned adaptations of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1992) and *The Seagull* (1994) and produced her original play, *Stanley* (1996). In the same year that *Stanley* opened, Gems' other biographical work, *Marlene*, premiered at the Oldham's Coliseum Theatre in Manchester. Both plays transferred to the West End. Gems' success with RSC, the National, and West End theatres never made her stop writing for fringe and regional theatres -- although the amount of her productions at fringe decreased during the 80's, which was partly due to the socio-political conditions of Thatcherism.

From 1980 to 1990, Gems wrote eight plays, and two semi-autobiographical novels titled *Mrs Frampton* (1989) and *Bon Voyage, Mrs Frampton* (1990). Her plays included *Aunt Mary* (Warehouse Theatre, 1982), *The Treat* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1982), *Camille* (RSC, 1984), *Loving Women* (The Arts Theatre, 1984), *Pasionaria* (Playhouse Theatre, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1985), and adaptations of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Tyne-Wear Theatre, Newcastle, 1980), Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, 1984) and Stanislawa Przybyszewska's *The Danton Case* (RSC, Barbican, 1986). As the list above depicts, only *Aunt Mary* was produced in the London fringe in the 80s.

[240] In 4 April 1979, the RSC produced Gems's *Guinevere* in its Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. However, there is little information about the production available except the cast information that included Conrad Asquith as Arthur and Suzanne Bishop as Guinevere.

The Iron Lady and British Theatre

The victory of Conservative Party over Labor Party in the general election of May 1979 was almost predictable after "The Winter of Discontent."[241] This political triumph for Conservatives made their leader, Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), the longest serving and the first woman Prime Minister of Britain, whose leadership was described as "the only twentieth century Prime Minister to lend her name to a political doctrine – Thatcherism."[242] Promising a better financial future, Thatcher did her best to put an end to the welfare state and lead Britain into a free market. This policy caused unemployment to exceed two million after only one year of her government, and pushed the country into a deep recession. From 1979 to 1983, Britain experienced its lowest economic growth since the World War II. Despite its financial stagnation, Thatcher's government handled two major crises: Falklands War[243] (1982) and National Union of Miners' Strike[244] (1984-5). These events, along with support from the newly-elected American president

[241] The period of public service workers' strikes in Britain between December 1978 and January of 1979. To control inflation, James Callaghan (1912-2005), the Labor Party's serving prime minister at the time, imposed a pay cap on Trades Union according to which no more than %5 of raise was allowed for miners. This caused a national unrest.

[242] Peacock, D. Keith. *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999. p. 11.

[243] The Falklands War took place between 2 April 1982 and 14 June 1982 between Argentina and the UK over British territories in the South Atlantic. Already amidst the civic unrest, Argentine military junta raised the Argentina's flag at South Georgia Island in hope of provoking Argentinian's patriotism. Despite the UK's warning, the Argentina's military expanded its invasion to Falkland Islands. This provoked Britain to respond militarily and recapture the islands in ten weeks.

[244] In the early 1980s the Conservative Party concluded that majority of British coal mines were no longer profitable and decided to close many and privatize those remaining. Miners went on a strike nationally.

Ronald Regan (1911-2004) as her international right-wing ally, led to Thatcher's re-election in 1983.

Thatcher's social ideology was as aggressive as her economic philosophy. She believed that there is "no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."[245] Accordingly, Thatcherism encouraged people to reclaim traditional family values: they must work hard in the marketplace during the day and return home worn out in the evenings. This focus on relentless work had dire consequences for the country at large that included an increasing number of unemployed citizens. In addition to decreasing funding for the National Health Service, Thatcher's policies went after the arts. Three months after her first election, Norman St. John Stevas, her first Arts Minister, announced in *The Observer*: "The arts world must come to terms with the fact that Government policy in general has decisively tilted away from the expansion of the public to the private sector. The Government fully intends to honour its pledge to maintain support for the arts as a major feature of policy, but we look to the private sphere to meet any shortfall and to provide immediate means of increase."[246]

As part of the government's mission to cut £500 million from its overall budget, the Arts Council faced a major funding reduction, causing their leaders to change their approach in funding theatre companies. In addition to these cuts in the Arts, the Conservative Party did away with metropolitan authorities (including the Greater London Council), and circulated a major policy document entitled "The Glory of The Garden" proposing to center Arts Council's funds on regional companies rather than focusing on

[245] In an interview published in *Women's Own* on 23 September 1987.
[246] *The Observer*, 14 October 1979.

London, diverting £6 million outside of the capital city.[247] This decision hugely impacted fringe and alternative theatres in London.[248] This is not to say that the number of alternative theatres necessarily declined during this time, on the contrary, the number of companies as Mary Luckhurst pointed out, "continued to increase for much of the decade, peaking at just over 300 in 1986."[249] However, the majority of these subsidized companies had to change their agendas during Thatcherism. Financial sustainability, rather than social activism, became the key factor for producing their seasons. For example, previously open to taking risks in experimenting with new forms of theatre, they became more prudent in their commissions and productions. Rather than advocating for new voices in theatre – one of fringe's initial missions – companies opened their doors to more established playwrights, actors, and directors who could secure the box office income. Small companies decreased the amount of productions to one or two shows annually. Touring companies "became more and more interested in the idea of working with specific communities rather than a loosely defined idea of the working classes and the intelligentsia."[250] Yet, the influence of Thatcherite capitalism on women and women's theatre of the 1980s was more complicated.

When Thatcher became prime minister, a feeling of considerable sense of hope increased among women as they considered her as a role model for successful women.

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[247] For more on this, please see Peacock, D K. *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999.

[248] After Arts Council faced budget cuts, Greater London Council (GLC) began subsidizing London theatre companies until it was abolished by the government in April 1986. After GLC, the Greater London Arts Association partially made up for this loss.

[249] Luckhurst, Mary. *Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.389.

[250] Ibid, 389.

British feminist Natasha Walter claimed her as "the great unsung heroine of British feminism" who "normalized female success."[251] However, this sense of hope did not last long. The materialist individualism that Thatcher promoted was fundamentally against the feminist commitment to democratic principles. Thatcher promoted a kind of new bourgeois mindset that suggested women should imitate maleness to succeed in a patriarchal society – what Caryl Churchill criticizes in *Top Girls*. Thatcherism obviously highlighted divisions among feminist mindsets and feminists' diverse approaches to compete and survive in the modern industrial world.

Thatcher's arts policy had detrimental effects on women initiatives and women's companies. Mrs. Worthington's Daughters, Monstrous Regiment, Siren, and Spare Tyre were just few feminist groups that disbanded during this time. Even companies that survived the era, like Women's Theatre Group (Sphinx), had to redefine their goals and administrative structures. To oppose the top-down structures practiced in male environments, many women groups initially ran their administrations collectively. Now they had to reverse that innovation and follow the same hierarchical structure and appoint artistic directors and staff members to deal with the needs for fund-raising and grant applications. Regarding productions, it was less expensive to commission a single playwright for a season rather than paying a group of people to devise a work. Although this meant less jobs for women in theatre, it provided a golden opportunity for writers, and a new wave of woman playwrights emerged and succeeded including Timberlake Wertenbaker (1956-), April De Angelis (1960-), and Sarah Daniels (1957-). Yet, it was Gems who convinced major subsidized theaters -- along with West End producers -- that

[251] Walter, Natasha. *The New Feminism*. London: Little, Brown and Co, 1998. p.174.

women's plays can be successful commercially. Transferring plays to commercial theatres was one of the strategies that major subsidized companies like the RSC and National Theater pursued to make up for their budget cuts under Margaret Thatcher's government. Jonathan Gems comments on this:

> How theatre used to be in England was you had the West End, which was commercial, and you had the subsidized theatre, which was funded by the government. And the rule was that never the twain shall meet. Because it wasn't fair to the commercial theatre producers to have plays financed by the government going into the West End. So, there was an unwritten law, you cannot have a subsidized play in the West End. That law was broken by *Piaf*, [it] changed everything.[252]

Piaf (1978)

Piaf is Gems' most well-known play. It was first produced at The Other Place just before Margaret Thatcher's election, and it became an international hit during her term in office. Jane Lapotaire took the leading role under the direction of Howard Davis. Gems wrote the play in 1974, well before her productions of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* and *Queen Christina*. It had received a small production on the fringe at Soho Poly Theatre but received no critical recognition. Three years later and after the successful experience with *Queen Christina*, the RSC directors were interested. Keith Gems recalled:

[252] In an interview with the author

> They'd heard about *Piaf*, somehow or other, I don't know how because nobody knew much about it, and they came down to see her and I remember this young director – Howard Davis - from the RSC on the doorstep. There was this rather chunky middle-aged woman opens the door of our Gothic sort of Revival house, and he asked for Pam, Pam Gems [laughs], waiting for somebody else to come. He hasn't recognized her at first. He thought she was her mother. Anyway, then he discussed the play, and they decided they'd put it on at The Other Place in Stratford, just as an experiment.[253]

Piaf was the first in a series of plays that Gems based on the lives of actresses that included Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and Ethel Merman which I discuss more fully in the next chapter. It must be noted here that this work was the first signal to the British theatre industry that successful biographical plays do not necessarily need to be based on old historical figures from previous centuries. On the contrary, they can be about contemporary artists that are known to potential theatre goers as they have already seen them in real life. In the case of *Piaf*,' Edith Piaf died in 1963 and memory of her was still very much alive among her fans. Piaf, however, had never performed in England, which was both positive and negative for this production's potential success. The show's audiences probably had not seen her perform live, so they could not compare her to the actress that played her role. At the same time, the lack of

[253] In an interview with the author.

this source material made it a challenge for Jane Lapotaire as she developed the role. Lapotaire explained how she found a way forward:

> Peter Brook gave me the biggest tip about playing Piaf because of course she never performed in England. He saw her at the Olympia in Paris. He said there were two women; there was 'the woman who walked from the wings to the microphone, and there was the woman who sang.' And of course, that was the most wonderful note for me because it separated the woman from the performer.[254]

Edith Piaf was a complicated performer with an adventurous life. She was born Edith Gassion on December 15, 1915. His father, Louis Alphonsine Gassion, was an acrobat and her mother, with a stage name Annetta Miller, was a street singer. Edith was a small girl when her parents separated and she had to spend most of her childhood with her grandmothers. At the age of eight, she joined her father in his street performances passing the hat for tips. It was during these moments that she began to learn singing. At seventeen she married Louis Dupont and shortly gave birth to a daughter named Marcelle. Her marriage did not last,[255] and tragically her daughter died of meningitis when she was only two years old. Edith was twenty years old when Louis Leplee discovered her during one of her street performances and gave her a place at his nightclub, Gerny's. After this her personal and professional life changed.

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[254] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Volume 33 (August 2017 issue).

[255] Piaf married two more times, first with singer Jacque Pills in 1952; separated in 1957. In 1962, she married a hairdresser Theo Sarapo, twenty years younger than her.

Gems' *Piaf* opens with Edith on stage singing her song "La goualante du pauvre Jean." After few lines she falters and stops, "swaying at the microphone."[256] The manager runs to assist her off stage but she resists and yells at him: "Get your Fucking hands off me, I ain't done nothing yet."[257] The second scene, with a long flashback, portrays Edith's first encounter with Louis Leplee in a street. She is singing "Les amante d'un jour" when 'Papa' Leplee notices her. He hands her some money and asks her to visit him at his club. Toine, Edith's best friend with whom she periodically works as a prostitute to pay for her rent, lends her costumes and tries to beautify her a little bit although her efforts are not successful. Next day, Edith meets Papa Leplee at his club. Fascinated by her voice, he gives her the stage name 'Piaf' [French for sparrow], to make her more marketable, and asks her to stay for dinner:

> LEPLEE: Are you hungry?
>
> PIAF: Not 'alf. [*She crosses to table, set for dinner, sits. Then she sips delicately from the finger bowl. Emil guffaws*.] What's the matter?
>
> EMIL: That's the finger bowl, scruff – for washing yer 'ands.
>
> PIAF: Where's the soap? All right, clever cock. Seen me drink – now you can see me piss. [*She does so. And marches off. Papa Leplee laughs*]

When a young servant, Emil, sets a dinner table for Leplee and Piaf, she mistakenly drinks from the finger bowl. When the servant draws this naivety to her

[256] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985. p. 11.
[257] Ibid., 11.

attention, she completes her strange act be peeing at the table. With this unusual and shocking scene, Gems attempted to reveal Piaf's wild and fearless 'self'. Piaf is not even ashamed to offer Leplee "sucking off or anything"[258] as an appreciation of his kindness, albeit she soon learns that he is gay. However, her intrusion in a male environment is not without its costs. One night three boys at the club make Piaf drunk to get her tell them where Papa Leplee keeps his money. Next day it is revealed that Papa Leplee was robbed and killed. Piaf is called to the Police Station for interrogation. They suspect her as an accomplice to murderers:

> INSPECTOR: Edith Gassion, I ask you, formally… what was your implication in the Leplee affair? *[He stands over her, slapping his leg lightly with his right hand.]*
>
> PIAF: I ain't done nothing! *[He slaps her face.]* Leave me alone... he was my guvnor... he give me my big break, I'm not gonna want to - *[He hits her again.]* - I'm ... I'm not gonna do him in, am I? *[He hits her again and this time she breaks down, sobbing noisily.]* I keep seeing him... with his face ... all over his chops ... all ... *[She continues to sob. Then it subsides. She pulls herself together with a tremendous effort, squints up at him mutinously.]* I ain't done nothing.[259]

Although Piaf is ultimately acquitted from these charges, she is fiercely criticized by the press and the media. Papa Leplee's death also deprived her of her major supporter

[258] Ibid., 16.
[259] Ibid., 21.

in the business. This tragic incident coincided with the beginning of a series of unfulfilled personal relationships that Piaf had with men. The first is with a handsome man named Paul, who tries to change her lifestyle and tame her unpolished manners to make her look middle-class:

> PAUL: You don't have to stay in the gutter just because you were born there.
>
> PIAF: I feel out of place! I'm doing like what you said… trying to be a lady… [*She becomes aware of her own voice, and shrivels in her seat.*] sorry, love…
>
> PAUL: After all … [*takes a fastidious sip from his glass*] after all, they don't want rubbish at the Palace.[260]

Her relationship with Paul does not last. Piaf's career loses ground due to World War II.[261] At this time Piaf and Toine rent a room in a brothel, doing their utmost to resist their former work. When the war ends, Piaf begins her singing career again and with speed establishes herself as an international icon.[262] This period coincides with her cocaine addiction, apparently used due to extreme physical pain from her multiple car accidents. Later Piaf begins an affair with a French boxer, the middleweight world champion Marcel Cerdan, who was already a married man with three children. On his way from Paris to New York, to see one of Piaf's performances, Marcel's plane crashes

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[260] Ibid., 25.

[261] The representation of Piaf's unemployment during WWII echoed the condition of many working-class people who faced unemployment and financial difficulties during Thatcherism.

[262] In real life, in addition to her singing career, Piaf worked as an actress. Her most notable appearance was in Jean Cocteau's 1940 play *Le Bel Indifferent* and in Marcel Blistene's film *Etoile sans lumiere* (1946).

and he dies. It was Piaf who insisted he board an earlier flight that lead to his death. This traumatizes her and drives her to a severe depression, increasing her drinking. Devastated by the loss of Cerdan, Piaf falls into short-lasting abusive relationships with young men. Returning to France, she takes couple of young American boys with her to Paris to assist with music production and vocals. Confiding to her secretary about her American lover, she explains: "he'll do till I trade him up. Always set up your next trick before you shove in the icepick."[263]

Her reliance on drugs and alcohol makes Piaf more nervous and less capable to control herself. Her relationships become more promiscuous, less stable, and less secure. At this point, she asks for her old friend, Toine, to help her escape her unsteady, insecure world. Toine is now a middle-class lady, married to a warehouseman in sanitary supplies. Choosing a traditional path, she has a happy life with three children. Reunited with Piaf, they reminisce old times. As Toine recalls their old stories, Piaf's head falls on her shoulder and she dies in her wheelchair. The play ends with Piaf's popular song "Non, je ne regretted rien."

Gems' play goes beyond situating Edith Piaf in a historical context and exploring her failures in a male-controlled world. Instead she highlights how a single working-class woman could reach the top of the music industry against all odds. Despite attempts to make her conventionally beautiful and middle-class, Piaf resisted and was determined to maintain her connection to her class. As Stephen Harvey says, "middle-class decorum meant nothing to a gutter gamine like Piaf – even international celebrity couldn't shake

[263] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985. p 44.

her defiant loyalty to her roots."[264] Gems refused to sentimentalize the life of this singer who came from the street. In fact, along with her singing talents, what made Piaf an international icon was that she surpassed the magnitude of her pains and sorrows for a period and survived against the odds in the tough music business industry. Yet, the emotional and physical side effects of working in this business took its toll. When Piaf died, she was only forty-eight years old, but she has been already ruined by mental health issues, crippled by rheumatism, and destroyed by accidents, drugs, and alcohol.

Like Gems' previous plays, this work was popular with audiences in the UK.[265] Lapotaire's outstanding performance won her The Society of West End Theatre Award (now The Laurence Olivier Award), The Variety Club of Great Britain Award, and the *Plays and Players* Award for the best actress.[266] Critic Jack Tinker after seeing Lapotaire wrote: "her success as the blighted Parisienne star, Edith Piaf, is the single most celebrated performance on the London stage."[267] After its national success, *Piaf* transferred to Broadway. Except for Jane Lapotaire and Zoe Wanamaker, the show was

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[264] Harvey, Stephen. "Piaf." *The Nation*. 232 (1981).

[265] Before beginning its London tour the play stopped for the short run in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Gulbenkian Studio. In London, it ran for thirty performances at the Piccadilly theatre and for forty-three performances at The Donmar Warehouse. As stated in the *Times* ["Piaf takes to the big stage", November 19, 1979, p. 7.], *Piaf* was sold out at both places. The play moved to Aldwych Theater for eight performances over the Christmas. And finally, it transferred to a bigger theater in London, the Wyndham, for 29 further performances. After its successful run in London, *Piaf* transferred to Broadway and opened at the Plymouth Theatre on February 5, 1980 for 165 performances.

[266] In an interview with the author, Lapotaire explained that political matters deprived her of the *Evening Standard* Awards for *Piaf*: "I won three of the four English awards but I wouldn't ever win the *Evening Standard* Awards because they knew I was too left-wing." Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Volume 33 (August 2017 issue).

[267] Tinker, Jack. "Why Jane has none of Piaf's regrets" *Daily Mail*, 18 January 1980. p. 7.

re-cast in the US. As John Corry wrote, this was the "first time the company [RSC] has allowed Broadway producers to mount and cast one of its original productions."[268] Interestingly the U.S. producers of *Piaf* were two women: Elizabeth I. McCann and Nelle Nugent. The show brought Lapotaire a Tony Award in her Broadway debut.

Lapotaire recalls that playing *Piaf* in the United States was a different experience. The play had a difficult run in its early stages: Americans "don't understand the concept of a drama with songs—*Piaf* wasn't a musical; the songs were chosen as a kind of contrapuntal emphasis to the dialogue."[269] In fact, Gems used songs as a vehicle of transitional moments in her plot and with them she developed Piaf's personality. The only time we see Piaf strong enough to share her anguish is when she is on the stage singing.

Scholar Helene Keyssar emphasizes that "Gems's musical selection in the play works against the sentiment associated with Piaf."[270] In order to dispel such a sensibility that could arise from the familiarity with some of Piaf's songs, Gems selected her less known numbers from her repertoire. This dramaturgical choice helped Gems to implement an alienation effect. This use of Brechtian technique continued with the decision to use songs between the acts, providing a fragmented frame for the play. As Janelle Reinelt writes, this strategy "for feminists… offer[s] a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior (how they are internalized, opposed, and changed)

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[268] *The New York Times*, July 4, 1980.

[269] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Volume 33 (August 2017 issue).

[270] Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theater*, p. 131.

and their interaction with other socio-political factors such as class."[271] Furthermore, by allowing scenes to nearly overlap with one another, Gems created a sense of montage. Susan Carlson explains this as follows: "this shuttling from scene to scene, and the mixture of song and talk provide a shifting, uncertain, unsettling background against which the unity of Piaf's character grows and glows."[272] Another aspect of the play that provides an amusing anecdote from the US tour was its unconventional scene in which Piaf pees on stage. Lapotaire explains:

> I was interviewed about the 'urination scene' and I sent up a few journalists saying 'oh, the scene where I pee on the floor like the Piaf did?' I used to tell journalists, 'well at four o'clock I have a liter of water and [she talks while laughing] at quarter to five I drink a pint of milk and then at quarter to seven have three Coca Colas. Just so that you know, at ten past eight it means I can pee on the floor.' [she laughs]. Nobody in England, in the newspapers, had ever called it 'urination scene', ever. Nobody had really ever paid any attention to it. But when I got to America, frequently I was asked 'isn't that a Tad Riskaroo? [she laughs]. And that's why I love Pam. It's pretty shocking having a woman pee on stage.[273]

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[271] Reinelt, Janelle. "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama," in *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1900. p. 150.

[272] Carlson, Susan L. "Women in Comedy: Problem, Promise, Paradox," in *Drama, Sex and Politics*, ed. James Redmond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p. 167.

[273] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Volume 33 (August 2017 issue).

The play's language also added to this cultural shock. It was very tough, extremely vulgar, and full of swear words. Lapotaire recalls:

> Usually I sang my first song to the sound of seats banging as all the blue-rinsed, white haired fur coated ladies from New Jersey left. Because as you know the opening line of the play - at the end of her life when she is so drunk and so high on morphine that she could hardly walk and the manager of the theatre tries to get her off - was 'get your fucking hands off me. I ain't done nothing yet.' And you could hear the gasps. As you know, I love America, and I've had some of my happiest times in in America teaching at Washington University in Saint Louis, but scratch an American and they're very, very prudish underneath.[274]

The play originally included thirty-six songs, but during rehearsals it was extensively revised and the number of the songs decreased to a mere nine. To help Americans understand the play, the producers required a major revision after its London run. Apart from cutting some scenes, more recognized songs of Edith Piaf were incorporated to the play, including her signature song "La Vie en Rose." Another change was the renaming of Marlene Dietrich's character. In the 1979-version of the script[275], the play includes the role of Marlene Dietrich who tries to calm down Piaf after her US tour fails. In the American revival and in the 1985 published script[276], Dietrich was renamed as Josephine. A quick speculation about this choice of Gems and her producers is that

[274] Ibid.

[275] Gems, Pam. *Piaf.* Ashover: Amber Lane Press, 1979.

[276] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985.

American audiences were very familiar with Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992) as she, unlike Piaf, had performed in America for a long time. Thus, it was determined to be a commercial risk particularly as Dietrich was alive at the time. Another viable reason for this change is that Gems wanted to return to Dietrich as the central role in her forthcoming *Marlene* (1996).

The original British production of *Piaf* received mixed reviews. Irving Wardle wrote that "like last year's *Queen Christina*, Gems's new piece for the Royal Shakespeare Company is a feminist document showing a woman's struggle to achieve full humanity against the obstacles of her sex and birth: the burden of sovereignty in Christina's case, brutalizing poverty in the case of Edith Piaf."[277] Walter Kerr criticized the play for its style, claiming that it "uses a jumping-jack narrative style that keeps leaping over the big emotional scenes, the urgent intimacies, that I most wanted to know about. A hastily brushed-in line of exposition, tossed our way after the fact, just isn't enough."[278] Frank Rich observed that "by consciously reducing virtually all of Piaf's friends, lovers and associates to indistinguishable nonentities, Gems deprived her heroine of an emotional context and transformed her into a mere symbol of abject self-destructiveness." Still he accepted that *Piaf* "is worth seeing - thanks to Jane Lapotaire, a powerhouse actress who insists on filling in the emotional tissue that Mrs. Gems leaves out."[279] Jack Tinker, however, appraised the play as follows: "I am full of admiration for the unsentimental approach author Pam Gems affords her central character. Piaf's rise

[277] Wardle, Irving. "Piaf." *Times,* 12 October 1978, p. 16.

[278] Kerr, Walter. "Critic's Notebook: When a Flash of Truth Leaps out at a Theatergoer from The Stage." *The New York Times,* 19 March 1981.

[279] Rich, Frank. "Critic's Notebook: The Sound of One Voice Talking," *The New York Times,* 16 April 1981.

from the gutter to the pedestal of a national idol is shown in a slick, yet convincing, theatrical shorthand."[280]

Among Gems' plays, *Piaf* is the one with the most revivals, among which include Peter Hall's 1994 production with Elaine Paige in the title role, staged at the Piccadilly Theatre; and Jamie Lloyd's 2008 production at the Donmar Warehouse starring the Argentinian Elena Rogers, who won the 2009 Laurence Olivier Award for the Best Actress. After *Piaf*'s national and international success, the RSC commissioned Gems to adapt Alexandre Dumas fils' novel turned play *La Dame aux Camelias* (*The Lady of the Camellias*, 1852), which like *Piaf* transferred to the West End.

***Camille* (1984)**

La Dame aux Camelias was originally written as a novel in 1848, one year after the death of Marie Du Plessis (1824-1847), on whom the Marguerite Gautier's character is based. Dumas, fils (1824-1895) and Du Plessis met in Paris in 1844 and carried on an affair for eleven months. Unable to afford the sumptuous expenses of this high-end courtesan, young Dumas, fils lost her to a richer man, but pursued his love for her in a semi-autobiographical novel. After the book's success, he adapted it for the stage and produced it in 1852.

The story portrays Armand Duval's love for the beautiful Marguerite Gautier, nicknamed as La Dame aux Camellias because when she is available for service, she wears a white camellia, and when she is not, she wears a red one. Upon Armand's insistence, Marguerite gives up her work and begin a new life with him. When Armand's

[280] Tinker, Jack. "Magnifique!" *Daily Mail*, 13 October 1978, p. 28.

father learns about their relationship, worried that his family's reputation is threatened, he urges Marguerite to leave Armand in order to save his future. It is only after Marguerite's death that Armand understands this and learns she has not left him for another man.

Besides the best-selling novel and the original play, this story developed as a cultural myth in the West and has been made into various operas and films. Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), who had seen the original play in 1852, recognized the story's musical potential and wrote *La Triviata* (*The Fallen Woman*, 1853).[281] The great success of Verdi's work helped to perpetuate the myth of Marguerite Gautier, the penitent whore. Early cinema further fixed this stereotype with silent movies such as André Calmettes' and Henri Pouctal's *La Dame Aux Caméllia* (1911) starring Sarah Bernhardt, and Gustavo Serena's *La Signora delle Camelie* (1915) with Francesca Bertini in the title role. After the emergence of sound films, George Cukor's *Camille* (1936) with Greta Garbo[282], Mauro Bolognini's *La Dame Aux Caméllias* (1981), starring Isabelle Huppert, and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) with Nicole Kidman, kept the myth of Marguerite Gautier - Camille - animated in modern times.

Gems conceived her adaptation of this play in 1984, at the height of Thatcherism when stressful financial situations shadowed people's relationships. Gems de-romanticized the original Dumas fils' story, for contemporary audiences. She noted:

> The original play was shocking in its time. And when I started writing, passion took over. The collision of sexual fashions was the

[281] Among other revisions, Verdi changed the names of leading characters from Marguerite Gautier and Armand Duval to Violetta Valéry and Alfredo Germont respectively.

[282] After *Queen Christina* (1933), *Camille* is the second film of Garbo that Gems adapted for the stage.

> real drama. Armand is not young and provincial here; he has black shadings. Marguerite is a hard, successful businesswoman and the society is marked by monsters, competitiveness, ugliness in relationships. Marguerite and Armand's relationship is one of business, of convenience – but then they fall in love, and love is never convenient.[283]

Like Dumas fils' novel, this play begins with an auction – held in the Marguerite's bedroom following her death. Moved by seeing Marguerite's private room and not wanting anybody imagining her in the mirror that is for sale, he buys it for twice its price. He cannot bare seeing her bed auctioned and becomes hysterical and is carried out the room. By holding the sale in her private room - and of course by price-tagging all her belongings, the reader/audience comes to imagine Marguerite as an *objet petit* – unattainable object of desire – very expensive but yet for sale – not only to Armand but also to other men who are bidding on this demimonde's private belongings.

The second scene of the play, a flashback, starts when Armand first meets Marguerite in an opera house foyer. He tries to attract her attention but Marguerite pushes him back as she does not think this young man is possible as a noteworthy client. He finally convinces her to spend a night with him. During this evening Marguerite has an attack of extreme coughing that signals tuberculosis, though she refuses to accept it. As the play unfolds, the audience comes to know that Armand is a bisexual who previously had unsuccessful relationships with men and women. He begins to express his love to

[283] Alvin, Klein. "Theater; 'Camille' Gets a Modern Retelling." *New York Times*, 7 December 1986.

Marguerite and convinces her that he is now happy only with her. Like other female characters created by Gems, Marguerite does not trust Armand's professed love and she refuses to let him get carried away with his emotions:

> Armand: I love it here. Everything in this room. Everything you see… everything you touch… I love the mirror because it sees your face – I love these … [*he picks up a bottle*.]
>
> Marguerite: Look at the crests, the initials. All different. Remember that when you start to feel sentimental.[284]

Marguerite reminds Armand of an important fact: as a demi-monde she has a notorious reputation, something impossible to ignore or erase. She draws his attention to the 'initials' of her previous lovers that are carved on the gifts they brought for her. This foreshadows how one of the initials will challenge their future together. Marguerite confides to Armand about her submission to her former master, who unbeknownst to him is Armand's father. A baby was conceived from this affair:

> Marguerite: At thirteen, I became a housemaid. I slept in an attic… my own bed, you can't believe the bliss! I couldn't wait to get up in the morning! To be in such a place… After two years *Monsieur le Marquis* took me into his bed. It was his habit with the younger maids. It kept him young. A year later I had our son… you have no idea what differences a child makes. Your

[284] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985. p. 105.

> life is quite changed. Forever. Of course, with a man, this can never happen. Not in the same way.[285]

Marguerite furthers her explanations that she was dismissed from le Marquis's house after the baby was born and she had to rely on prostitution for living. Gems incorporates her own personal experience to Marguerite's past life and makes the play semi-autobiographical – as is Dumas, fils'. The following monologue is indeed Gems' record of her childhood:

> Marguerite: You want to know? What do you know? I know the way you live! Hot-house grapes, lofts full of apples, figs with the bloom on them… stables, libraries, a fire in your room. [*She lopes, fiery and restless.*] I used to clean the grates with my mother… five o'clock in the morning on tiptoe while you all snored. I saw them! The rugs, the pictures, the furniture… chandeliers… music rooms, ballrooms… all a hundred meters from where we lived on potatoes and turnips, and slept, the seven of us together, in a coach-house loft.[286]

Gems demystifies Marguerite's image by not only giving her a child but also characterizing her as working-class woman. Gems goes on and reveals another tragic moment of her own life. As it was discussed in the introduction, she was molested at a very young age. Marguerite entrusts Armand by telling him that she was raped when she was only five:

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[285] Ibid., 106-107.
[286] Ibid., 106.

> Marguerite: After all… what had I got to lose? Innocence? That had gone before I was five. [*He leans on his elbow abruptly*.] look at me. I was a pretty child – do you know what that means? It means when your uncle sits you on his lap and gives you sweets he puts his thumb in you. It was worse after my father died. I had no protector – no one to break their jaws… and, there are the cakes… the apples… the money pressed into your hand, if you promise not to tell… he made me get a bucket of water after – to clean up the blood in case the dogs came sniffing.[287]

After coming to know all about Marguerite, Armand convinces her to quit her salon and go with him to live in the countryside. Armand's father, Monsieur Duval, reminds Armand about Marguerite's reputation and wants him to reconsider his decision: "You dare to come to me, talk of marriage? Introduce a harlot?... A woman who has felt the private parts of every man in Paris?"[288] He threatens Armand that if he marries her, he will end his support of him and will boycott his business in the city. Against all this, Armand marries Marguerite and takes her and her son, Jean-Paul to the country. Monsieur Duval, however, approaches Marguerite and tries to intimidate her to leave Armand. When he learns that this strategy is not effective, he targets Marguerite's son and promises a good education and future for Jean-Paul. He also agrees to adopt him. Marguerite resists again, however, he reminds her that he is Jean-Paul's father and can

[287] Ibid., 108.
[288] Ibid., 123.

acquire his custody by law. It is then that Marguerite submits to his request and leaves Armand. Gems by giving Marguerite Gautier a son succeeded to de-romanticize Dumas, fils' work because she abandons Armand not for his sake but for the economic future of her son.

Shortly after Marguerite's separation from Armand, her consumption deteriorates and she dies. Gems deconstructs the sentimental finale of Dumas, fils' story. In her version, there is no evidence of deathbed reconciliation and remorse and nobody pities Marguerite. Gems' approach in dealing with Marguerite's consumption is another example of Gems' theatrical revision. Lesley Ferris writes, "Marguerite's death depicts consumption as a horrific, blood-spattered demise with much physical suffering and fear of death, not the romantic fading away of Dumas fils' heroine collapsing majestically sans raspy cough in her lover's arms."[289] In Gems' play, Marguerite is a victim of heredity and environment; however, she does her best to survive the restrictive condition in which she is trapped.

Gems deconstructs the original ideas of romantic life and sacrifice promoted in Dumas fils and maneuvers on the withering effects of class especially for women. Gems' Marguerite creates a women's community in her salon to support other women who are struggling to survive amidst the competitive businesses of being a courtesan in Paris. By creating the characters of Sophie, Clemence, Prudence, Yvette, Janine, and Jean, Gems populates the play with a cohort of women who provide a view of the diversity of their age-old profession. This view is not unlike the one she created in *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and*

[289] Ferris, Lesley. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*, New York: New York University Press. p. 168.

Vi. She highlights the difficulties of single individuals while at the same time connects them to each other as a larger collective. All these women are in one way or another entrapped, striving to find a means of escape from their world. In Marguerite's salon are women who are forced to shoplift, whore, or work as high-end courtesans to survive. At the end of the play, Marguerite's women are successfully matched to male partners, putting an end to their difficult and dubious jobs. It is Marguerite, who like Fish, brings them together and tries to help them overcome their problems. And like Fish, only Marguerite is not properly settled at the end; and carrying this analogy further, Marguerite's death could also be considered suicidal...

Camille premiered on 4 April 1984 at The Other Place. Ron Daniel directed it with Frances Barber (Marguerite Gautier) and Nicholas Farrell (Armand Duval) in the cast. In March of the next year it was remounted at the Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle-upon-Tyne before starting its four-month run at the Comedy Theatre, London. Frances Barber received Olivier Awards nomination for "Most Promising Newcomer" for her role. In December 1986, the play transferred to the US and opened at the Long Wharf Theatre, New Haven, with American actress Kathleen Turner as Marguerite Gautier.

With all its intrinsic potential, this play received mixed reviews. Victoria Radin wrote that "Pam Gems's adaptation of *Camille* is armed with ironies and a solid appreciation that life must go... It is a compelling evening."[290] Critic Mel Gussow criticizes the source of the story: "Lacking even a romantic impulse the play becomes a potboiler. One wonders what drew Miss Gems (the author of "Piaf") to the old story.

[290] Radin, Victoria. "Sax for Sale: Camille." *New Statesman*, 8 November 1985.

Perhaps it was to try to uncover covert feminism in 19th-century France."[291] Benedict Nightingale described Gems' feminism in this play as "the moderate sort that believes in the possibility of genuine understanding and reconciliation between the sexes. Her Camille comes to love Armand, whose aristocratic childhood was scarcely less brutalizing than her own, and he comes to respect her."[292] Despite the range of critical concerns the production was popular with audiences, in part because of her dramaturgical approach as director Ron Daniel explained:

> The play is modern in tone, even though it's set in period; the characters don't behave in a period way. It's about the parameters of love from a woman's point of view. They are very immediate and alive, and have fun and sometimes they're cruel. Sexual transactions are cash in hand. The whole world is seen as a sexual marketplace; it's a dangerous world of money and joy and pain - and sordid moments - and Marguerite and Armand love each other, but differently.[293]

Daniel is right about Gems' objective to entertain the modern audience with presenting on stage with what attracted them at the time, however, what is more discursive and long-lasting in Gems' play is her effort to question and revise the historical male-constructed image of Camille as the "Penitent Whore.' As scholar Lesley Ferris asserts, the construction of this mythical image requires three elements:

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[291] Gussow, Mel. "Stratford Keeps Its Kingly Standards." *The New York Times*, 12 August 1984.

[292] Nightingale, Benedict. "In London, Two Actresses Shine." *New York Times*, 1 December 1985.

[293] Alvin, Klein. "Theater; 'Camille' Gets a Modern Retelling." *New York Times*, 7 December 1986.

> The first is that the woman is both beautiful and evil and her transgressions are entirely sexual - she sells her body to men. Secondly, once she repents and asks forgiveness, she willingly accepts, indeed embraces, physical suffering and deprivation […] The third recurrent narrative feature requires that the woman must die, and that her death be viewed as a release from physical torment and pain, a mortal resolution to a life of decadence and decay.[294]

These maxims are all perceivable both in the original and in many adaptations of *La Dame aux Camelias*. Gems' play, however, distances itself from representation of Marguerite as promiscuous evil whore. By changing the nature of her business, giving her a child to sacrifice for him, making her a leader of a women's community, and by resisting the original sentimentalization, Gems revised Camille's narrative and provided a complicated female rather a one-dimensional courtesan, something that, this three reviews above demonstrates, did not please majority of male critics and scholars.

In addition to being a biographical drama with a woman protagonist, and using flashbacks/flash-forwards, *Camille* shared other dramaturgical strategies with the other two plays previously discussed. In this play Gems developed her technique of cinematic/film writing for the stage, something that she began working on since the production of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, and that she advanced with *Queen Christina* and *Piaf*. Jonathan Gems believes that Gems was the first playwright that practiced this style of writing in England: "One of the things that my mother sort of invented or developed is

[294] Ferris, Lesley. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*, p. 80.

what has now become quite common which is a film writing for the stage. If you read or see *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, it's done in, like film sequences, with blackouts and you know this was something that she devised and no one had really done that before as far as I know."[295] This feature of Gems' plays was criticized at the time of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* and *Piaf.* By the time of *Camille*'s production critics and reviewers came to understand and appreciate this innovation. Peter B. Young wrote that "*Camille* is very modern in both its theme of commercial motivations and its use of contemporary techniques of dramatic construction."[296] Two more plays of Gems that used this technique and like *Camille* and *Piaf* became commercially successful were *Marlene* and *Stanley* both produced in 1996. They attracted lots of attention, created sensations, and received both national and international acclaim.

Marlene **(1996)**

After adapting the film *The Blue Angel* in 1991, Gems returned to her fascination with Marlene Dietrich by writing *Marlene* in 1996. Set in Paris in 1973, the first part of the play focuses on Marlene Dietrich's private conversations with her lesbian assistant, Vivian Hoffman. This takes place backstage during the sound check and dress rehearsal for the opening of her concert. The second part of the play happens on stage with Dietrich meticulously stage-managing every moment of her show. By situating her in different private and public settings, Gems attempts to deconstruct the Hollywood myth surrounding Dietrich. Gems accentuates that like other humans, Dietrich struggles both

[295] In an interview with the author.
[296] Young, Peter B. "Theatre Review: Camille." *Theater Journal*. 37.3 (1985): 358-360. 360

psychologically and physically. Despite the masculine, mysterious image promoted by Hollywood, Gems highlights the emotional turbulences that underscores numerous uncertainties for Dietrich. Her major hesitancy centers on her interminable worries as to whether she can attract enough costumers as she did in her old glamorous days. These unsettling thoughts oblige her to hire a number of people to play the role of her fans, encircling her car, bringing bouquets of roses to her before and after the performance, and ask her for autograph.

Gems' Dietrich is a garrulous woman who does not stop to talk to others. Even when supporting actors are not present in the scene, she goes and talks on phone. It is through her unceasing voice, that she reveals her plan to divorce or when she recalls her World War II's memories - particularly when Germans spat on her. When she cannot verbally discharge her repressed anger, she conveys her feelings with her physical movements. For example, in one instant, despite her high-end grandiosity, she falls to her knees and forcefully scrubs the dirty floor. Dietrich is finally exhausted in the final scene and sings songs from her repertoire.

Sian Phillips (1933-) was sixty-three when she starred in *Marlene*. With her angular bone structure, androgynous voice, and imposing stature, Phillips closely resembled Dietrich. This, along with her singing ability, made her a perfect choice to reclaim the Hollywood legend. Baz Bamigboye admired Phillips as the "perfect actress to portray Marlene Dietrich on the stage. Both women epitomize the forgotten art of glamour and sophistication."[297] Usher applauded Phillips for her performance: "a strong and winning personality as well as talent is required to evoke a female embodiment of the

[297] Bamigboye, Baz. "Sian is Perfect for Dietrich." *Daily Mail*, 4 March 1994.

personality cult, and she [Sean Phillips] displays it."[298] Paul Taylor acclaimed the actress, observing "the Taj Mahal bathed in moonlight is scarcely less majestic a monument than Phillips's cheekbone-flaunting Dietrich under Mark Johnson's von Sternberg-esque lighting."[299] Phillips superb performance in *Marlene* brought her both Olivier Award (1998) and Tony Award (1999) nominations for Best Actress in a Musical.

The play received its premier under the direction of Sean Mathias at the Oldham Theater on 2 October 1996 and opened at the Lyric Theatre in the West End on 8 April 1997. American producers, Ric Wanetik and Fredric B. Vogel, brought the show to Broadway for a brief run at the Cort Theatre in April of 1999. In the same year that *Marlene* premiered in London, Gems wrote another history play, *Stanley*, which was produced by the Royal National Theatre.

***Stanley* (1996)**

After scoring remarkable success with her biographical plays on women, Gems undertook research on the private and artistic life of another historical figure, Sir Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), whose works inspired her personally. As one of the most celebrated British painters in modern times, Spencer is known for his self-portraits, his religious expressions, and his paintings with biblical themes like *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1927) and *The Baptism of Christ* (1952). Spencer was born in the picturesque village Cookham, on the river Thames in Berkshire, almost forty miles west of London. Coming from a working family, he took his early drawing lesson from a local artist,

[298] Usher, Shaun. "Sian Has Us Falling in Love Again with a Legend." *Daily Mail*, 9 April 1997.
[299] Taylor, Paul. "She's a Drag Act." *The Independent*, 10 April 1997.

Dorothy Bailey. At sixteen, he attended Maidenhead Technical Institute, which ultimately opened his way to the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London. In 1925, he married a painting student Hilda Carline (1889-1950). Their marriage resulted in two daughters, Shirin and Unity. From early 1930's Spencer began an affair with another painting student, Patricia Preece[300] (1894-1966), who served as a nude-model for him.

Despite being a homosexual, Patricia asked Spencer to marry her in order to acquire his money and social status. Madly in love with both Patricia and Hilda, he decided to live with both of them. However, Patricia insisted that he must divorce Hilda. He did so only with a false hope that after this marriage, he will be able to convince Hilda to come back to be part of a ménage a trois. Patricia eventually left Spencer to live with Dorothy Bailey, the art teacher, as well. Peter Lewis observed that Spencer "used to walk around the village telling anybody who would listen that he had been tricked by her [Patricia] out of his money and his house, that she [Patricia] would not live with him."[301] Spencer's psychological struggles finally culminated in an ambitious, never-achieved, project *Church House* in which he painted images of all women he had relationships with during his life.

Like Edith Piaf, Stanley Spencer died in the mid twentieth century. The British audience were already familiar with him and probably had seen his works in different national galleries and museums. So, Gems cleverly, as Penny Cherns noted, chose

[300] Patricia had a lifelong companion, Dorothy Hepworth (1898-1978), who – like Patricia - was a student of painting at the Slade School of Fine Arts like. In late 1920's, Patricia and Dorothy moved to Cookham, where Dorothy's parents bought them a cottage.

[301] Lewis, Peter. "The Frustrated Polygamist of Cookham." *Daily Mail*, 27 January 1996.

Spencer as her subject because "the audience could come to [him] with a certain amount of foreknowledge and then Pam could upend it."[302] Spencer's life by itself was an interesting subject for a drama, but Gems had other personal interests for dramatizing his life. Gems wrote: "one of the things I've always loved about him is his modesty and the modesty of his people. I always admired his work, even when I was very young.[303] She added, "I am working-class too, I was brought up in a church atmosphere, I was picked out as a gifted child, and I also grew up in the meadows, between two rivers."[304]

Spencer emerged at a troubling historical moment – right after the war and during the art world obsession with abstract expressionism. Also, as Gems believed, "his Christian iconography was very uncomfortable after the war and the Holocaust."[305] The mistakes that he made in his personal life, which Gems portrays in her play, added to his misfortunes. She had a complementary reason to write a play with a male protagonist. Nancy Meckler explains that Gems wanted to create a starring role for Antony Sher:

> With *Stanley*, she was prompted to write something for Antony Sher. What she always said to me was there was a production of her adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* that was at the National Theatre and there were a lot of fantastic actors in it, including Ian McKellen. And I think four of them were nominated for Olivier Awards for that play… Antony Sher was the one person in the cast who wasn't

[302] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Three Women in One Frame: Pam Gems, Penny Cherns, and Christina of Sweden." *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Forthcoming in Volume 28 (issue 4).
[303] Qtd in Davis, Clive. "Resurrection and the life." *Sunday Times*, 4 February 1996.
[304] Qtd in Simmons, Michael. "Marks of Spencer." *The Guardian*, 22 January 1996.
[305] Ibid.

> nominated for an Olivier. And she just thought I'm going to write something for him.[306]

Gems achieved her goal in writing this play as Antony Sher won an Olivier Award for 'Best Actor' in 1997 for *Stanley* under the direction of John Caird. Gems also wrote strong female roles in addition to Stanley. The play gave Anna Chancellor (Patricia) her first major theatrical role at the National Theatre and won the Laurence Olivier Award for 'Best Supporting Actress' for Deborah Findlay (Hilda). The play won the Laurence Olivier Award and *Evening Standard* Award for 'Best Play', making Gems the first woman to win this trophy in the award's 41-year history since then. Like *Piaf*, *Stanley* transferred to Broadway, provided Anthony Sher with his Broadway debut, and brought a Tony Award nomination for Gems.

Gems' play opens with Stanley and his first wife, Hilda, who is posing while he draws her. He preaches while he works explaining that a good painting is born out of the mixture of craft and inspirational 'love'. He believes only 'love' depicts the true nature of the world. The next scene occurs in Stanley's studio, where he comes to know his Cookham neighbors, Patricia and Dorothy. Seeing himself among his artist friends, Stanley lets it be known how much he dislikes the contemporary avant-garde artists. He believes they are depriving people of finding true ecstasy in art for the sake of showing off their intellect. He states, "Vorticist… Surrealist… all this fashion for Idea – you think that's what it takes to fill a canvas? Fill space for the glory of God? To paint from Here … (*he bangs his chest.*) – it's the hardest, hardest thing… anybody can do it from the

[306] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*." *New England Theatre Journal*. Volume 27 (2017 issue).

mind… but from the heart… .”[307] By sentences like this, Gems tried to situate Stanley within an artistic context Stanley worked in as well as disclosing his obsessions with metaphysical ideas. The art movements he mentions here were active prior to and just after World War I, during the time he was an art student.

For inspiration, Stanley often invoked earthly beauty, particularly from women in his painting. This characteristic, however, created havoc in his life. He loses his sexual attraction for his wife, Hilda and focuses his attention on Patricia, who takes full advantage of her primary position in Stanley’s world. Patricia’s manipulations extend beyond her relationship with Stanley. She brazenly sells Dorothy Bailey’s paintings under her own name by convincing her that sexual appeal – rather than artistry and craft – produces more sales. Patricia mesmerizes Stanley and makes him divorce Hilda. She also convinces Stanley to put his house in her name after which she leaves him to live again with Dorothy. Stanley is only allowed occasional conjugal visits at her cottage.

In the second act, Gems portrays Stanley’s psychological inconsistencies after losing both women he loved. He searches for an answer to his every present question “why must a man have only one woman?”[308] He believes that polygamy is a sign of intelligence and produces “the most intense state of being and awareness.”[309] Believing that Patricia will never return, Stanley approaches Hilda and asks her to return to Cookham and live with him. She refuses. A penultimate scene depicts Stanley visiting Hilda in hospital fighting breast cancer. The play

[307] Gems, Pam. *Stanley*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1996. p. 10.
[308] Ibid., 55.
[309] Ibid., 55.

concludes with Stanley in his Cookham home, alone, knighted and finally gaining respect.

Compared to her previous productions, *Stanley* received more positive critical responses from men, which I elaborate on in the next chapter. Women critics' responses to this play were mixed. Novelist Maggie Gee, the only female critic in a field of men, applauded Gems and wrote, "Stanley is a play about love and faithfulness, in art and in human relations. Spencer's last words probably apply to both, and pick up the play's central pun: 'Beautifully done'."[310] Some years later in a scholarly essay Elaine Aston discussed her concerns about the female characters of the play:

> The portrait of Patricia and Hilda may be difficult and painful for lesbian and heterosexual feminist spectators. The narrative demonization of Patricia is problematic, even though there may be pleasure in her heterosexual masquerade as a means towards a lesbian end; the destruction of Hilda in a narrative of masculine makes for uncomfortable feminist viewing.[311]

From the feminist point of view Gems' take on *Stanley* can be considered a divergence from her previous women-centered plays. Having a strong central male character by itself is enough to claim that she did not stick to feminist approach of giving a woman a lead role. However, with a deeper analysis, readers, audiences, and critics can acknowledge that Gems' thoughts in this play are similarly in line with what she adhered

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[310] Gee, Maggie. "Beautifully done." *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 February 1996.

[311] Aston, Elaine, 'Pam Gems: body politics and biography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston and Janelle G. Reinelt, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 171.

to in her preceding works. Usually in her plays prior to *Stanley*, she put women either in women community like *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* or in a center of a men's community like *Queen Christina* and *Piaf*. However, in this play Gems structured her drama more closely to the hegemonic world in which men dominate society. In such a community women are primary focus of male gaze but secondary subject of public attention. Accordingly, in this play Stanley Spencer takes the primary role and his wives, Hilda and Patricia, are supporting roles. However, Gems very intelligently shows that within this male system women play important roles either for its success or its failure. Their integration can significantly help boost this system; we see that at the beginning of the play Stanley draws positive inspiration from his wife and he is both well-respected and successful. When he begins to oppress Hilda, his life begins to malfunction, and this is central to Gems' drama. It is true that Stanley drives the plot forward as a protagonist must do, however, the key question in his story is that why he is not happy and why did he encounter such spiritual and existential crises. Gems constantly reminds her readers/viewers that Stanley's failures are due to his misplaced sexual desires - what he called spiritual invocation of earthly beauties of women. It is why in a series of scenes at hospital, she makes the holy-image of Hilda and brings Stanley to her sanctuary-like room for confession. After he spiritually reunites with Hilda, he begins to return to his respected successful position.

Although Gems emerged as a promising writer in the London fringe theatre, it was her plays at the RSC and the RNT that established her as a major player in the modern British theatre. Sweeping the British drama awards with *Stanley*, she proved that she was a crafted playwright who could write for all audiences irrespective of their

genders. With *Piaf*, *Camille*, and *Stanley*, commercial West End producers embraced her work proving that women's stories and plays can find success in a male dominated theatre industry. In the next chapter, I discuss how a highly successful playwright like Pam Gems lost her prominence and over a relatively short time period became nearly forgotten in the world of British theatre.

Chapter 5: Doubly-Lost: Gems and Her Reclamations of Actresses

Pam Gems revived selected influential women from history by writing biographical plays about their careers and the challenges they faced. With her revisionist style of writing, she gave the presence of women on the stage a momentum that could be seen as unprecedented in British theatre. Her successful productions ranged from the fringe and reached to the West End theatres and Broadway. Significantly, Gems provided opportunity for audiences to see history from a female perspective. Yet despite the number and success of her plays, she has been overlooked in theatre industry and in academia - receiving far less attention than she deserves.

In the following I investigate the reasons for this underrepresentation, particularly since her death. I approach this dilemma from four different angles. First, I consider how theatre artists and the establishment received Gems as a theatre personality. Second, despite the attention she received in the 70's and 80's from a range of scholars, why did they abandon Gems and turned their attention elsewhere in the 90's? Third, did the negative press she received in later productions, such as *Marlene*, turn earlier enthusiasms and important appreciation away? Finally, did Gems make some strategic mistakes that injured her longevity in British theatrical memory?

Theater practitioners, especially actresses and female directors who closely worked with Gems adored her as a writer who played an undeniable role in changing women's status in modern drama. The artists and scholars who have been interviewed for

this project[312], all acknowledged her unflagging support for women and introduced her as a playwright who always stood up for their rights in the profession. As discussed in chapter two, from the early stages of Women's Festival in 1973, Gems committed herself to supporting theatre groups and backing younger women in theatre. Her house in Kensington was a base for weekly meetings and readings for many years. Besides her role in the establishment of women's groups, actresses loved her for creating plays with strong roles - unprecedented in British drama. Jane Lapotaire valued Gems' role in her professional success and she testifies how the opportunity to play the leading role in *Piaf* changed the course of her career:

> Pam Gems was the best thing that ever happened to me as an actor, because she gave me a chance to be a protagonist - to run the play. I had never had experience of that before, not even in Shakespeare. Rosalind is the third size of Hamlet, and Queen Katherine of Aragon, nowhere near the size of Henry VIII or Wolsey. I mean in most Shakespeare plays women are outnumbered eight to one. In fact, in *Piaf* we had to take care of the men [*she laughs*] because the boot was on the other foot - because it was a play about women.[313]

Denise Black, who had her first theatrical experience in *Pasionaria*, punctuated the same quality of Gems' work and stressed how Gems was persistent in helping young

[312] For the full list of my interviewees refer to Appendix II.

[313] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*." *New Theatre Quarterly*. Volume 33 (August 2017 issue).

actresses succeed in male-dominated theatre: "I was nobody and it was just extraordinary that anybody should believe in me that much. And she even rewrote it because I was very young at the time, I was twenty and Dolores Ibarruri was 40."[314]

Majority of Gems' plays have strong female protagonists. This feature of her writing made actresses approach her for leading roles commensurate with their potentials. Sian Phillips, being told that she looks like Marlene Dietrich, was one of them who commissioned Gems to make *Marlene*, for her.[315] Besides her own interest in exploring the lives and allure of actresses, as discussed in previous chapter, Gems defined a mission for herself to explore the art of acting – on and off stage. She felt that "there's a lot of misunderstanding about the nature of acting and what it's like to be an actor. People still think you go about showing off and being a luvvie, but my experience is that off-stage they tend to be shy and tired. Since acting takes so much energy, eight performance a week, you don't have the energy off-stage to mess about."[316] It was this understanding of her actors that led her foster her connection to them beyond the working zone. Gems kept a close relationship with her female directors as well; among them were Sue Dunderdale, Sue Parish, Nancy Meckler, and Penny Cherns.[317] Gems was at least twenty years older than them and this helped her to assume the role of a mother figure without pushing them back. Sue Dunderdale noted: "for me, because I had a difficult relationship with my own mother, she became like my mother, not in a maternal kind of way, because she wasn't

[314] In an interview with the author.

[315] Please see Appleyard, Bryan. "The Lady is for Burning." *The Sunday Times*, 20 November 2005.

[316] Pratt, Steve. "Interview with Pam Gems: In Praise of Devine Monsters." *The Northern Echo*, 6 March 2006.

[317] Every one of these directors collaborated with Gems in at least two projects…

maternal. But as a comrade and a colleague."[318] Despite her good time with women in theatre, Gems did not have a happy relationship with mainstream theater. As Dominic Cavendish observed, "critics, and the theatre establishment, have tended to hold her at arm's length."[319] It is true that mainstream theatres embraced her work, but, as Sue Dunderdale put it, "there always seemed to be a feeling from Gems that they did her work despite her being her."[320] Dunderdale recalled, "Howard Davis always used to say he made *Piaf.* Pam had a not very happy relationship with him. He directed *Piaf*, Pam wrote it, he didn't make it. And *Piaf* has stood the test of time." She continued:

> When Pam died I wrote to Nicholas Hytner[321] to say that there were two plays of Pam that still needed to be done. He didn't even ask to read them. Now the National had benefited greatly from *Stanley,* from her *Seagull,* and from her *Uncle Vanya*. I can't think of a male playwright of Pam's status that if they had died and you wrote to say there are two plays that have not been done, the artistic director of that institution would have not immediately wanted to read them.[322]

Most of Gems' plays in mainstream were staged by the National Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company. One reason is that these large subsidized institutions could

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[318] In an interview with the author. Please see: Najar, Esmaeil. "We Don't Want Clever in Theater, We Want Real Wisdom: Sue Dunderdale, Pam Gems and a Life Full of Memory." *Texas Theatre Journal*. Volume 14 (2018 issue).

[319] Cavendish, Dominic. "Passionate Pam." *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 March 2006.

[320] In an interview with the author.

[321] Nicholas Hytner (1956-) worked as an artistic director of the Royal National Theatre between 2003 and 2015.

[322] In an interview with the author.

afford the expenses of sizeable casts and equally significant design and productions budgets. For example, *Camille*, *Piaf*, and *Queen Christina* had twenty-five, thirty, and thirty-four characters respectively. Such large-scale plays with numerous roles and epic structures require deep pockets. Even with role-doubling or tripling, a minimum of ten actors are needed and as a result, many smaller theatres hesitate to consider them.

Piaf received two major revivals in the West End, proving it can succeed in smaller venues. But this success did not lead to attempts to stage other works. Within Gems body of work there are plays on a much smaller scale, yet their original productions served as star-vehicles, in some cases for specific women. For example, *Marlene* has a cast of only three roles but the role of the Marlene requires a performer who is able to sing as well as act in a two-hour marathon of challenging dialogue. The role of Piaf is similar, requiring a demanding physical stamina. Lapotaire explained how her role as Edith Piaf tested her:

> What a role, what a wonderful role, the best role I had in my entire life. But it cost physically. I lost the use of my arm for a year – in fact I had to play the last month of *Piaf* with my right arm on my hip and only gesture with my left hand. Doing the drug withdrawal fit seven times a week split the nerves in my right shoulder blade. My right arm became useless.[323]

Somewhere else Lapotaire furthered her explanation of Piaf's demanding role: "I couldn't exactly use the word 'enjoy' about *Piaf*. I didn't do one performance in three years without feeling terror – and I mean *terror*. I was like starting a boulder rolling.

[323] In an interview with the author.

More often than not, I was in front of the boulder and it was rolling after me rather than me being behind the boulder and controlling it. I went down to nearly seven stone."[324] The intrinsic challenge of Gems' works and theatres' hesitation to approach her plays combined together and blurred her well established position in British theatre. More revivals could bring more attention to her. It could also help critics and scholars re-consider her significance in modern drama.

Scholars and Gems' Oblivion: Falling in and out of Love

Before delving into the survey of critical books to see how Gems' status changed over a short period of time, I elaborate the conceptual difference between women's theatre and feminist theatre. I draw from two major sources a decade apart: Susan Bassnett's essay "Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre" (1984)[325], and Lizbeth Goodman's *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (1993)[326]. Bassnett's essay is one of the earliest works to tackle this distinction while Goodman's is one of the first works that considers a wide range of plays and theater practice by women.

Susan Bassnett traced the emergence of the term "women's theatre" in the British context up to the genesis of women's movement. She reported it was originally used "to describe the agit-prop protest by women's groups and gay groups against the Miss World

[324] Lapotaire, Jane. "What Are You – An Actor or A Mother." in *Sheer Bloody Magic: Conversations with Actresses*. ed. Carole Woddis, London: Virago Press, 1991. p.14.

[325] Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. "Towards a theory of women's theatre," in *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984.

[326] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993.

contest in 1970 and in abortion rallies of the same period."[327] But in a lengthy description, she explained the complicacy of this term in modern theater discourse:

> There is a problem of the term 'women's theatre' as opposed to 'feminist theatre', and although reviewers tend to use the two randomly, it does seem that there is a distinction to be made. 'Feminist theatre' logically bases itself on the established concerns of the organized Women's Movement, on the seven demands: equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free 24- hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; an end to discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality; freedom from violence and sexual coercion. These seven demands, of which the first four were established in 1970, and the remainder in 1975 and 1978 show a shift towards a more radical concept of feminism that asserts female homosexuality and perceives violence as originating from men. The tendency therefore is not so much towards a re-evaluation of the role of women within society as we know it, but towards the creation of a totally new set of social structures in which the traditional male-female roles will be redefined.[328]

[327] Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. "Towards a theory of women's theatre," in *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984. p. 447.
[328] Ibid, 447.

So, for Bassnett the term 'feminist theatre' is explicitly a politicized concept in contrast to 'women's theatre' as an umbrella term. It is not disputed that feminist theatre is politically oriented, however, this Bassnett's statement raises an important question: how much of applied feminist theatre in the 70s actually worked towards the so-called "seven demands" of women's movement and how the theatre itself led to the definition of this term. It must be noted that Bassnett's definition of the "feminist theatre" is very Eurocentric and is based on undefined common grounds. Definitely, she ignores the polyphony in feminism. In chapter two, I discussed how ideological and practical differences in just one women group during the 1973 Women's Festival led to their division. Also, as examined in chapter three, women's questions and their political interests changed during the 80's and 90's. Now the question is: do all the branches of feminisms, from materialist and socialist to liberal or radical feminism, pursue the same goals? The simple short answer is no.

Lizbeth Goodman in *Contemporary Feminist Theatre: To Each Her Own* attempted to provide a definition that fills this theoretical gap born out of the shifting nature of the term and feminist ideology. Considering the pluralism in feminisms, Goodman discussed different ways language, gender, class, race, and power inform the definition of the term 'feminist theatre'. She came up with a definition that is malleable and is adjustable to different social, financial, racial, and ethnic situations. Goodman believed that 'feminist theatre' includes "all the different schools of feminist thought and practice. It allows for a cultural emphasis on 'women's experience', yet it acknowledges

that some feminists reject this idea as potentially reductive or essentialist. Crucially, this definition allows for a diversity of approaches and perspectives among practitioners."[329]

Given these two definitions of 'feminist theatre', let us consider how scholars received the work of Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill. The earliest work that deserves consideration here is Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (1980)[330], which focused on alternative theatre in Britain and investigated the role of individuals in its development.[331] Among women playwrights, Itzin allocated only one chapter to Caryl Churchill and thoroughly examines all her plays staged by 1980. Comparing Churchill to Edward Bond, she wrote that like him, "Churchill came only gradually to be able to intellectualize what was always an intuitive socialist (and feminist) perspective – to analyze and to understand her own personal experience in terms of class society."[332] Itzin remarked that "if political commitment is measured by the adage of actions speaking louder than words, then Churchill rated high. Not just with the content of her stage plays, but with the stances she took."[333] Itzin provided only short notes for other women writers including Gems. She claimed that

[329] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 34.

[330] Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980.

[331] Itzin in a chronological order documents the history of major anti-establishment groups Like Cast (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre), AgitProp Street Players/Red Ladder, 7:84 Theatre Company and playwrights who contributed to political theatre including Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, David Edgar, and Howard Barker.

[332] Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. p. 279.

[333] Ibid., 279-280.

Gems is "not so much a socialist writer as one concerned with sexual politics."[334] Itzin considered Gems a feminist playwright, however, not because of writing political plays but for her dissident attitudes towards the theatre establishment. She reported the story of the Royal Court Theatre managers who rejected *Queen Christina*, as I discussed in previous chapter, on the ground that it appealed more to women. As a response to Royal Court's decision, Gems in an interview with Michelene Wandor declared the following: "That got to me. I mean, would they ever have said, 'we can't do this play, it will appeal to men?"[335] Drawing from this statement, Itzin subsumed that "as a feminist playwright, it was this kind of attitude in society that Pam Gems was writing against."[336]

One year after Itzin, artist scholar Michelene Wandor published *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (1981).[337] In this work, Wandor elaborated on the ambiguity and complexity of the term feminism and discussed why some women are reluctant to be considered a feminist. She noted that among the number of feminist features the first is "the breaking of sexual and 'body' taboos." Accordingly, Wandor argued that "moments in Caryl Churchill's and Pam Gems' plays reveal a particular concern with female sexual independence."[338] Gems and Churchill are the only two women playwrights who Wandor devoted subdivisions to in her chapter "Women Writers." Wandor observed that "Pam Gems is an important writer for a number of reasons; she spans the experience of two generations; she lived through the war as an adult, yet she has an openness to present-day

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[334] Ibid., 290.

[335] Interview with Michelene Wandor, *Spare Rib*, September 1977.

[336] [336] Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. p. 291.

[337] Wandor, Michelene. *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Methuen, 1981.

[338] Ibid., 71.

ideas. She writes boldly about women – re-appraising mythologized heroines such as Piaf and Christina, and her work has been both successful and 'popular' within the enclave of 'new' serious writing."[339] Wandor maintained that "Caryl Churchill is perhaps the most sophisticated women writers in the theatre in terms of her stagecraft and technique, and she is also the most widely published."[340] She examined Churchill's *Owners, Traps, Vinegar Tom, Objections to Sex and Violence, Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and Pam Gems' *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi, Queen Christina*, and *Piaf* in her book. It is interesting that Wandor saw Mary O'Malley's *Once a Catholic* as "undoubtedly the best-known (and most widely seen) play by a woman writer in the 1970s."[341] *Once a Catholic* was first produced by the Royal Court Theatre in 1977 before transferring to the West End and is considered first and foremost a comedy. It ran for over two years and is her only work with a significant history, having only written a total of seven plays.

In 1984, Helene Keyssar in *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (1984)[342] talked about the precursors of feminist theatre. Keyssar dedicated the chapter six, "Communities of Women in Drama: Pam Gems, Michelene Wandor, Ntozake Shange," to the discussion of works and legacies of these playwrights. Keyssar studied Gems' *Piaf* and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* and observed that Gems' dramaturgy "reveals her keen eye for the subtle disturbances and internal turmoil of women struggling with dual roles."[343] In contrast to Itzin who saw

[339] Ibid., 63.
[340] Ibid., 68.
[341] Ibid., 68.
[342] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1984.
[343] Ibid., 129.

Gems' work unpolitical, Keyssar acknowledged the political nature of her plays. She saw that many of Gems' dramaturgical choices "can be seen as deliberate political decisions"[344] in the context of feminist drama. The only playwright who received an entire chapter analysis is Churchill. Like Itzin, Keyssar appraised Churchill as a political writer. In the chapter entitled "The Dramas of Caryl Churchill: The Politics of Possibility," Keyssar closely explored the history and themes of Churchill's plays produced between 1973 and 1982 including *Top Girls*, *Cloud Nine* and *Vinegar Tom*. In Churchill, Keyssar maintained, "psychological conflicts and outer 'social' conflicts walk together, and equally, on stage."[345]

In 1984, another substantial volume of criticism was published. *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, co-edited by scholars Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren,[346] included important essays like Susan Bassnett's "Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre," discussed earlier. Bassnett argued that feminist dramaturgy used 'history' as a vehicle to address contemporary issues. She based her argument on two plays written on the life and history of Queen Christina of Sweden: Ruth Wolff's *The Abdication* (1970) and Pam Gems' *Queen Christina*. Bassnett considered the authors' differing views of this queen. Bassnett explained that the American Wollf makes "a very traditional statement about women's identity, for the juxtaposition throughout is between the public, seen as the male part of

[344] Ibid., 131.
[345] Ibid., 94.
[346] Schmid, Herta, and Aloysius. Kesteren. *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1984.

Christina's consciousness, and the private, which is the female part."[347] In contrast, *Queen Christina*, is set in the context of women's theatre in 1977 and "gives us the portrait of a woman not torn between abstract ideas of love and duty, but fighting to understand and come to terms with herself."[348] Nonetheless, Bassnett claimed that Gems' Christina "for all her apparent challenging of sexually determined social roles, is no feminist."[349] Bassnett believed that Gems leads Christina to face "the coldness of a rational feminist world"[350] especially when she visits the Bluestockings in France. For Bassnett, Christina "represents instinct"[351] and is not politically oriented. This echoes the very same criticism that Itzin and Keyssar expressed about Gems' work.

In 1986, Michelene Wandor released the revised version of her earlier work five years after its first print with a modified title: *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*.[352] It is interesting that Wandor did not change Gems' section at all despite the fact that between 1981 and 1986, Gems premiered *Aunt Mary*, *Camille*, and *Pasionaria* in London. Wandor only added two concluding paragraphs to her section, which provided essential evidence for Gems' later status in academia:

> In evaluating the influence of the feminisms on Pam Gems' work, we have a fascinating mixture: in *Piaf* and *Dusa* there is a very

[347] Bassnett-McGuire, Susan. "Towards a theory of women's theatre," in *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984. p. 450.
[348] Ibid, 451.
[349] Ibid., 452.
[350] Ibid., 452.
[351] Ibid., 452.
[352] Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

> clear radical feminist dynamic operating in the way that the friendship and interdependencies between the women exist absolutely in their own right, and are given strong and continuous stage space (*Dusa* has an all-women cast). At the same time, both these plays and *Christina* show great need for, and dependence in, men.[353]

What Wandor saw as radical feminist in 1986 might not necessarily project as radical today in 2018. I believe Gems neither in *Piaf* nor in *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* ever attempted to pursue radicalism to address her fellow women's issues in the mid and late 70s. A deeper attention to these plays clarifies that neither of the women communities in these plays are shaped willingly. Women in *Dusa* had to shelter in Fish's apartment to their social, financial, and political circumstances and they did their best to survive this imposed situation. The case in *Piaf* is a little different. Like women in *Dusa*, Piaf and Toine initially unite due to their financial situation. They are working together as prostitutes to pay their rent. However, when they are able to work and live decently, they break their community. Toine marries a traditional life and Piaf begins a series of love relationships. Wandor continues that, "Indeed, for both Piaf and Fish dependence on men is a despairing thing, since each looks for happiness with a man and yet neither finds it, showing something of a bourgeois feminist dynamic."[354] Wandor was right about the unsuccessful relationship of women and men in these plays,

[353] Ibid., 168.
[354] Ibid., 169.

but she neglected the fact that in these plays, especially in *Dusa*, women are the sole players of their destiny. It is true that men influenced women in *Dusa*, however, with intentionally making them absent on stage, Gems punctuated the individuality of each woman and her power of decision. Wandor continued to extent her similar criticism of Gems' plays to *Queen Christina*:

> Christina, on the other hand, is less concerned about men than the loss of motherhood; for her the radical feminist principle of sexual self-determination (something demonstrated beautifully in Piaf) has led to her undervaluing motherhood until it is too late. For Dusa, however, motherhood is central, and her story line is entirely about getting her children back from her husband who has 'stolen' them. All the women in these plays are powerfully and confidently sexually self-determining; they all also, within their defined spheres, demonstrate the bourgeois feminist dynamic of individual existential power over their lives. However, at the same time, only the doomed Fish really tries to step outside the boundaries of what it can be to be female. The plays thus interweave elements from both the radical and the bourgeois feminist dynamics, and the socialist feminist dynamic has little place—although Piaf carries with her the gritty values of her early street life, it is a lumpen, rather than a socialist quality."[355]

[355] Ibid., 168-169.

This Wandor excerpt clarifies the way in which women's drama has been measured on the scale of socialist feminism – an approach that Itzin and Keyssar began to pursue in their feminist criticism of theatre. Like Itzin and Keyssar, Wandor argues that "the socialist-feminist dynamic has little place" in Gems' plays in contrast to Churchill's dramaturgy.[356] For her discussion of Churchill, Wandor used her original materials from *Understudies*, however, in contrast to Gems' section, she updated Churchill's section with the thorough discussion of *Top Girls* and *Softcops*, plays that were produced between 1982 and 1984.[357] One year after the publication of this book Wander published *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (1987).

In this work Wandor focused on the representation of women in modern drama using a play on words in her title to reference John Osborne's realist drama that had a significant impact on British theatre. Among women playwrights she examined are Doris Lessing, Shelagh Delaney, Ann Jellicoe, Maureen Duffy, Caryl Churchill, and Pam Gems. The only woman who Wandor assigned an exclusive chapter was Churchill. Gems, Mary O'Malley, and Nell Dunn were placed in one chapter. The logic of juxtaposing Gems with these two single-play authors is questionable. Such a lowering of Gems' status served to gradually marginalize her as a secondary 'woman' playwright. It furthered the fortunes of Churchill, solidifying her position as the one and only leading British 'feminist' dramatist.

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[356] Ibid., 166.

[357] Besides Gems and Churchill, Wandor in this volume also analyzed the works of Mary O'Malley, Nell Dunn, and Claire Luckham. Mary O'Malley had a success with *Once a Catholic* (1977), Nell Dunn was applauded for her *Steaming* (1981), and Claire Luckham excited feminists with *Trafford Tanzi* (1980).

It is noteworthy to mention that some scholars such as Sue-Ellen Case and Katherine Worth appreciated the politics and theatrical inventiveness in Gems' plays. Case, in *Feminism and Theatre* (1988)[358], wrote that *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* "centers on the problematic intersection between Marxist political work and a feminist consciousness."[359] Worth in "Images of Women in Modern English Theatre,"[360] explored *Camille* and *Queen Christina* and noted that in these plays Gems "cuts her heroines free of the romantic context in which they have been enclosed and returns them to the rough realities of common life."[361] Worth is not the only scholar who noticed this aspect of Gems' drama. Susan Carlson in "Revisionary Endings: Pam Gems's Aunt Mary and Camille," [362] focused on the novel structures of Gems' plays and observes that "insistently with her endings, Gems reinterprets theater structures so that the disproportionate power of conclusions works for, not against, women and others on the margin of society."[363] She asserted that Gems led "a struggle for feminist drama by pressuring old forms and proposing new ones."[364]

By the 80s and the early 90s – with the development of feminist theories - a repertoire of discussion developed around Gems' and Churchill's plays. Throughout 90s and 2000s, however, positive criticism on Churchill expanded and attention on Gems

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[358] Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. New York: Methuen, 1988.
[359] Ibid., 87.
[360] Worth, Katherine. "Images of Women in Modern English Theatre," in *Feminine Focus: The New Woman Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
[361] Ibid., 6.
[362] Carlson, Susan. "Revisionary Endings: Pam Gems's Aunt Mary and Camille," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989, 103-117.
[363] Ibid., 103.
[364] Ibid., 116.

gradually faded in scholarly writing. This body of critical discourse imposed itself on readers and other theatre practitioners and made them identify Churchill as a model, wiping out other significant woman playwrights from the map of British feminist discourse. Susan Carlson in *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (1991) pointed out that in the interviews she conducted with female writers, "Caryl Churchill was the only contemporary women writer to be cited more than once as a model."[365] Despite the unhappy reception of some of her plays, Gems was still a widely indexed playwright in theatre books of late 70s and 80s. However, during the 90s her status in academia lowered. Christopher Innes' attitude towards her best exemplifies this.

In *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* (1992), Innes devoted the final chapter of his volume to 'Feminist Theatre' and subdivided it to two sections of "Pam Gems: Reinterpreting the Stereotype" and "Caryl Churchill: Theatre as a Model for Change." He acclaimed that Gems and Churchill are "the two major writers whose work has become an important and influential part of the general repertoire."[366] Innes prioritized these writers because several of their works had mainstream productions at the RSC and the Royal Court. About Gems, he particularly appraised her style of writing and her filmic techniques that were new for that time. He wrote "whichever way we look at it, the old norms won't do any more."[367] However, ten years later, in the revised edition of his book,

[365] Carlson, Susan. *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991. p. 185.

[366] Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 452.

[367] Ibid., 457.

Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century (2002),[368] Innes restructured his thoughts about women playwrights. Gems' and Churchill's position have shifted in his new text. In the second edition of his book, Innes did not anymore have the chapter on 'Feminist Theatre', instead he added a section about women's theatre - with the heading "The Feminist Alternatives" - in the third chapter "Social Themes and Realistic Modes." In this section, he talked shortly about Gems. Noticeably, Innes removed Gems's name from the content page of his second book. In the final chapter of this volume, "Poetic Drama – Verse, Fantasy and Symbolic Images," he substituted a new writer instead of Gems to accompany Churchill as representative of feminist playwrights. Sarah Kane was introduced as a groundbreaking radical feminist and received a thorough analysis by Innes in his section entitled "Sarah Kane: The Poetry of Madness in Violent Dreams." It was not surprising to see Sarah Kane, as a new force in British drama, attracted attention with her breakthrough *Blasted* (1995). Identified as a leading example of the male-initiated and dominated "in-yer-face" genre, reminiscent of the previous Angry Young Men movement, Kane was recognized by both male and female critics and scholars.

In another example, Lizbeth Goodman in *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (1993) highlighted Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker among other British feminist playwrights and commented that their popularity "not only in Britain but also in Canada and the United States, and recently in Eastern Europe suggests that there may be something 'mainstreamable' about their work. Perhaps part of this popularity is related to the depiction of capitalist issues and values in some of the work

[368] Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

by these women."[369] Goodman acknowledged that a few of Gems' plays are also "occasionally embraced according to both commercial and academic values,"[370] however, Goodman did not discuss any of Gems' plays in this text. In contrast, she explored every single play of Churchill. Similarly, Michelene Wandor used the same strategy in her *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama, 1970-1990* (1993)[371]. She only dedicated a short paragraph to *Piaf* in contrary to her in depth examination of Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud Nine*, and *Top Girls*. The same negligence towards Gems and her legacy is committed in Elaine Aston's *An Introduction to Feminism & Theatre* (1995)[372]. Like Wandor and Goodman, Aston does not discuss any plays of Gems and thus contributed to deemphasizing her once-canonical status.

Unfortunately, within the seminal books of 1996 and 1997 there is no trace of Gems and her works. Neither in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (1996)[373] nor in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (1997)[374] is Gems mentioned. In the former, Churchill and her plays are discussed in six chapters of this twelve-chapter volume and in the latter, she is featured in two of the six chapters. Almost the same story repeated with Aston's *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (1999). Aston in this work studied all Churchill's plays up to then but provided no analysis of Gems' work. Something that

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[369] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 25.

[370] Ibid.

[371] Wandor, Michelene. *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama, 1970-1990*. London: Longman in association with the British Council, 1993.

[372] Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1995.

[373] Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

[374] Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. London: Routledge, 1997.

caught my attention in Aston's engagement with these playwrights is the way she introduced them. She inset Churchill as "a leading, international, contemporary British playwright" whose work "spans a range of socialist and feminist issues."[375] Interestingly, she introduced Gems as "a working-class woman playwright whose long career in the theatre was established in the feminist fringe of the 1970s, since when she had a long association with the RSC."[376] Two phrases in Aston's introduction of Gems deserve attention: first, "working-class woman playwright" and then "association with the RSC." Class is an important factor in the establishment of artists in Britain. It is noteworthy to mention that, as the director Sue Dunderdale punctuated, "class" played an important role in Gems' underrepresentation and in Churchill's prominence in British theatre. In an interview with the author, Dunderdale noted:

> The English. It's class. Pam is not Caryl Churchill. Caryl is very upper class... I don't want to put her down, there are some good plays, etc. Pam is a kind of her own person - with her own view. And, at the center, apart from *Nelson* and *Garibaldi*, the center of her plays are always women from difficult or working-class backgrounds, or men from equivalent backgrounds.

Another important factor in playwrights' status – very similar to academics' positions – is their education institution. Usually British playwrights graduated from Oxford or Cambridge receive more attention in theatre industry and in academia and are taken more seriously than graduates of other British universities. This is perceivable in a

[375] Aston, Elaine. *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook*. London: Routledge, 1999. p. 202.
[376] Ibid., 203.

way Wandor approached Gems and Churchill in *Carry On, Understudies*. She introduced Gems with a focus on her rural background: "Pam Gems was born in 1925 and spent her early life in a small village in the New Forest."[377] Wandor, in contrary, emphasized on Churchill's education: "Caryl Churchill went to Oxford University in the second half of the 1950s, where she wrote for student theatre."[378] Another method to unconsciously direct readers' attention to Churchill was to promote her visually. Recognizable images from Churchill's plays became front covers for some scholarly books. For example, Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* and Aston's *Feminist Views on The English Stage Women Playwrights, 1990-2000* for instance drawn from *Top Girls* and *The Skriker* (1994) respectively.

The promotion of Churchill and at the same time the undermining of other playwrights is, in my opinion, continuing in today. After the millennium, Gems received little attention in academia. Wandor in *Post war British Drama: Looking back in Gender* (2001) and Aston in *Feminist Views on the English Stage Women Playwrights, 1990-2000* (2003) simply overlooked her. The only essay that deserves to be mentioned here is Aston's "Pam Gems: Body Politics and Biography" published in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (2000). The third part of this volume questioned the canon and studied playwrights who are or were once canonical. Aston examined Gems, Janelle Reinelt explored Churchill, and Gabriele Griffin wrote about Daniels. Regarding Gems, Aston observed "hers is not a success-glamour-story, but is one of hardship and struggle; of a life, in and out of the theater, disadvantaged by both

[377] Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. p. 163.
[378] Ibid., 169.

class and gender."[379] Aston claimed that "Gems works with this dual vision: she brings her 'before' and 'after' experiences [women's liberation movement] to bear on the complications which greater choice and opportunity mean for women, and resist the temptation to write polemically about a world which has suddenly got 'better' for women since the late 1960s and 1970s."[380]

Scholars and critics were not the only reason for Gems' underrepresentation in academia. Another reason is that her plays were not as accessible as other playwrights' works for a long time. Her plays were/are not included in any major drama collections. Only two three-play anthologies, *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, and Loving Women*,[381] and *Plays One: Pam Gems*[382], which includes *Piaf, Camille*, and *Queen Christina*, were published by Penguin and Oberon Books in 1985 and 2004 respectively. Nick Hern Books and Oberon printed some of her original plays and adaptations, but they are not available as anthologies. Michelene Wandor and Mary Remnant compiled nine volumes of *Plays by Women*[383] between 1982 and 1988. *Queen Christina*, *Aunt Mary*, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* were featured in three separate volumes of this series, which are now out of print. A simple library or google search proves it is difficult to find Gems' plays in print compared to other playwrights like Churchill who has been featured in major anthologies, and play collections.

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[379] Aston, Elaine. "Pam Gems: Body Politics and Biography." in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston, and Janelle G. Reinelt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 157.

[380] Ibid., 158.

[381] Gems, Pam. *Three Plays: Piaf, Camille, Loving Women*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985.

[382] Gems, Pam. *Plays One: Pam Gems*. London: Oberon Books, 2004.

[383] Wandor, Michelene, Mary Remnant, and Annie Castledine. *Plays by Women*. London: Methuen, 1982

The Tide Turns: Critics View of Gems' Theatre Twenty Years On

As I have pointed our earlier, Gems' work received impressive attention by a variety of theatre critics in all the major British newspapers and magazines including *The Times Literary Supplement, Plays and Players, The Sunday Times, The Daily Mail, The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Evening Standard, The Times, The New Statements,* and *The Spectator*. Although Gems' work were mostly garnered challenging critics, she was acknowledged as an influential force in the British theatre. Critic Lyn Gardner called her "the grand dame of British Theatre"[384] and reviewer John Peter wrote that Gems' writing "has both warmth and uncompromising toughness."[385] It is noteworthy to highlight that majority of theatre reviewers and critics were, and still are, male. Obviously, they understood worlds of male characters and their stories easier comparing it to women's world. This is most noticeable when we look at one specific year, 1996, in which two of Gems' plays were produced: *Stanley* and *Marlene*. The latter was produced outside London at the Oldham Theatre before transferring to London. *Stanley* as we have seen was produced by the National Theatre and received numerous awards, including the 1997 Laurence Olivier Award and Evening Standard Award for 'Best Play'.

Compared to Gems' other productions, *Stanley* received more positive reviews. Benedict Nightingale remarked that "The Cottesloe can never have looked so exotic… all that is needed is a lively biographical play, and Pam Gems, a specialist in the genre,

[384] Gardner, Lyn. "Precious Gems." *Plays and Players*, April 1985, p. 12.
[385] Peter, John. "Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi." *The Sunday Times*, 12 December 1976, p. 35.

provides just that."[386] William Feaver praised the play and Anthony Sher's acting in the title role: "Pam Gems puts Spencer's words back in his mouth, sometimes in a new context but always appropriately. Antony Sher scuttles and harangues, running the words past us with endearing yet appalling zeal."[387] The *Evening Standard*'s reviewer, Nicholas De Jongh, wrote that "there's a powerful sense of conviction about Pam Gems's fascinating portrait of Stanley Spencer […] Miss Gems resists the temptation to delve sensationally into the quagmire of Spencer's sex life which was messy, lavish and far from Anglo-Saxon cool."[388]

In contrast to *Stanley's* critical reception, the reviews for *Marlene* reveals how critics, both in the UK and USA were displeased with her emphasis on a woman's life. Benedict Nightingale criticized the play writing "even the superb Sian Phillips cannot turn Gems's new Marlene into much more than one of those cabaret or compendium shows that have recently been cramming our stages."[389] American critic Charles Isherwood wrote that "the monologues about the trauma of the war and Dietrich's decision to abandon allegiance to her homeland have some shape and interest. The rest of the play is a bizarre, meandering concoction of bitchy or reverent showbiz anecdotes and pathetically tired musings on love and the cinematic art."[390] Nick Curtis regarded the play

[386] Nightingale, Benedict. "Of women and God in the corners of Cookham; Theatre." *The Times*, 3 February 1996.
[387] Feaver, William. "Is Stanley Spencer in the Theatre Anything Like the Real Artist?" *The Observer*, 4 February 1996.
[388] De Jongh, Nicholas. "Riding High on This vision of Innocence and Eros." *Evening Standard*, 2 February 1996.
[389] Nightingale, Benedict. "One Star Inside Another." *The Times*, 11 October 1996.
[390] Isherwood, Charles. "Marlene." *Variety*, 19 April 1999.

as "a random, roaming monologue by Dietrich that ticks off all the major touchstone of the star's life as if they were items on a shopping list."[391]

In the next chapter, I will draw from Elaine Aston and will discuss how women's plays of the 1990s and the decades after lost the momentum of fashion and rarely were successful in demonstrating the unexplored aspects of women's psyches and circumstances in an appealing way– or if they were, they were not completely successful to attract both the public's and the critics' attentions. In this context, critical reception of Gems continued to be mixed. Assessing *Mrs. Pat* in 2006, Dominic Cavendish wrote that "hers is a writing that cuts to the core, and wears its heart on its sleeve. Gems in now 80, but as busy as ever, and her undimmed thrill at theatre's power to sweep you off your feet and carry you into another world blazes forth as she sits in her Bayswater drawing room."[392] In hindsight, however, Gems' work garnered mostly negative reviews. I discussed in previous chapter how her style of writing was initially unfamiliar for british reviewers. While newspaper critics are not the sole arbiters of a writer's success, they do capture—perhaps unfairly in some cases---a change in the reception of Gems' work, especially in modern time.

Not in Her Own Best Interest

As a pioneering playwright Gems had made some personal mistakes that were influential in the way scholars and critics received her. For example, as actress Denise Black put it, "she had a sixth sense for saying the wrong thing in public." One of her

[391] Curtis, Nick. "Marlene Remains a Magical Myth." *Evening Standard*, 9 April 1997.
[392] Cavendish, Dominic. "Passionate Pam." *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 March 2006.

statements that disappointed feminists was that - against all her support and contribution to women's theatre - she withdrew from the label 'feminist'. In an interview with Ann McFerran in 1977, she declared that "I think the phrase 'feminist writer' is absolutely meaningless because it implies polemic, and polemic is about changing in a direct way. Drama is subversive."[393] Sixteen years later, in a conversation with Lizbeth Goodman, published in *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*, Gems qualified her above statement, but it was too late. She mentioned to Goodman that "being labelled feminist creates disadvantages for the artist. But what is the alternative when you seek a just society? [...] I do not question the relevance of the word feminist to my work. The feminist outlook was my springboard."[394] But as her plays and statements reveal, Gems, as someone who studied psychology, was aware that there would be stronger effects if she worked on viewers' subconscious rather than addressing women's issues on a direct political level. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she repeated that "drama begins where politics and the civic and direct involvement leave off. It inhabits a different territory."[395] It was this viewpoint of her that displeased some feminist scholars. The majority of academics who wrote about her, maneuvered around her position – some appreciated her for its boldness and others berated her. For example, Catherine H. Burkman appraised her for this belief and wrote "Gems's strength as a playwright lies partly in her ability to take

[393] In an interview with Ann McFerran, "The Theatre's (Somewhat) Angry Young Women," *Time Out*, October 1977.

[394] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 16.

[395] Gems, Pam. "Not in Their Name," *The Guardian*. 19 May 2003.

on feminist issues without writing polemical plays."[396] In contrast, Margaret Lewellyn-Jones criticized her and claimed that Gems wrote "with an anxiety to avoid polemic and with an ambivalent attitude to feminism, so as to be more appealing to a commercial audience. Furthermore, she reflects the position of woman as victim rather than providing a critique which would imply the need for change."[397]

Gems did openly question some radical approaches in feminist drama that I will explore shortly. But before that, I want to provide examples of how Caryl Churchill dealt with the term 'feminism' as a comparative strategy. As quoted in Itzin's *Stages in Revolution*, Churchill announced that "if pushed to labels, I would be prepared to take on both socialist and feminist, but I always feel very wary."[398] In another example, she asserted: "what I feel is quite strongly a feminist position and that inevitably comes in to what I write. However, that's quite different from somebody who is a feminist using writing to advance that position."[399] Later, in an interview with the American Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Churchill observed that, "when I was in the states in '79 I talked to some women who were saying how well things were going for women in America now with far more top executives being women, and I was struck by the difference between that and the feminism I was used to in England, which is far more

[396] Burkman, Catherine H. "The Plays of Pam Gems: Personal/Political/Personal" in *British and Irish Drama Since 1960*, ed. James Acheson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. p. 192.

[397] In *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958*, ed. by Trevor Griffiths and Margaret Lewellyn-Jones (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993). p. 38.

[398] Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1980. p. 279.

[399] Qtd in Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 237.

closely connected with socialism."[400] Based on these comments, Churchill's overall reception of the concept and practice of feminism apparently pleased women scholars more than Gems' statements.

Gems had also fundamental issues with radical 'separatism' propagated by agitprop groups. She was especially critical of the movements that aimed at the disruption of family. She noted that "the antagonism between the sexes has been painful, an indictment of our age. It is true that many women have been drawn, properly, to the Women's Movement after abuse by bad husbands, fathers… they have had hopes pushed aside, seeing brothers favored from infancy. It makes grievances, fear and resentment. But, as often, one sees men hopelessly damaged by women […] their mothers. We cannot separate ourselves.[401] She continued, "naturally feminism attracts many women who have been damaged by men, and who can now find areas of real protection and succor. But we're all perfectly well aware of the reverse of it: children, boys as well as girls, driven out of themselves by the age of four by cold mothers. I have sometimes wondered why there hasn't been more backlash, militant groups formed by men, in retaliation."[402]

Perhaps one of the reasons that Gems avoided to writing a straightforward political play was her unwillingness to disaffect separatist views. Writing about male historical figures like Stanley Spencer and Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882), she made it clear that she did not believe in radical views. She complained, "society's all wrong, men should be fighters, protectors, impregnators. Women are there to nourish. The further we

[400] Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig. *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987. p. 77.

[401] Pam Gems, in an afterword to *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, in Plays by Women: Volume I, ed., Michelene Wandor, Methuen, 1983.

[402] Wandor, Michelene. *On Gender and Writing*. London: Pandora Press, 1983. p. 150.

get away from that, the more trouble we're in."[403] Some of her conservative approaches, was due to her age. In interview with Betsko and Koenig, she iterated this:

> Partly because I am older. I've done a fair amount of living so that things flop out. I try not to be schematic. I fear the so-called committed theatre, which can be fascistic. I am for Dionysus. Also, there is this dirty word *entertainment* […] We are inviting people at the end of their working day. Brecht was a great entertainer… good songs by Kurt Weill and [Hans] Eisler. Politics, direct statements, belong on the platform not the stage.[404]

I must add her rural working-class background to this seemingly conservative position. Gems remarked that, "I was often called reactionary. The first time I went to a women's group I took jam, because that's what you do in the country – I was that naïve."[405] She knew well that her political views and discursive dramas would not make feminist scholars happy. She noted: "I always disappoint the feminists who never get what they want from me."[406] Catherine H. Burkman confirmed that Gems' "feminist stance tends to get her into trouble with some critics who are threatened by her feminism, and with others who find her not radical enough."[407]

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[403] In an interview with Dominic Cavendish. "Passionate Pam." *The Daily Telegraph*, March 6, 2006.

[404] Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig. *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987. p. 208.

[405] In an interview with Dominic Cavendish. "Passionate Pam." *The Daily Telegraph*, March 6, 2006.

[406] Qtd in Attallah, Naim. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p. 136.

[407] Burkman, Catherine H. "The Plays of Pam Gems: Personal/Political/Personal," in *British and Irish Drama Since 1960,* ed. James Acheson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. p. 192.

Another issue that Gems could herself resolve before her death was deciding on a place for her archive. It was not until some years ago that Gems son, David Gems, made her work available for free on Pamgemsplays.com and in this way provided the opportunity for readers to come closer to her body of work. Gems archive has not been placed until recently. Indeed, not placing the archive in an accessible venue exacerbates the issue of not being remembered. Gems' archive is in a process of being transferred to The British Library. Hopefully, this move brings more scholastic and academic attentions her way.

Gems also did not make time to consider her life's work by writing full introductions for the majority of her plays, an unusual move for a playwright. For example, Sarah Daniels (1957-), Louise Page (1955-), and Timberlake Wertenbaker (1956-) wrote first-person introductions for their anthologies of play, which were all published in 1994, 1990, and 1996.[408] Gems tended to write short forewords or afterwords for her single plays and never provided a full commentary on a selection of her works. Both of her anthologies lack introductions and only include scripts.

Another feature in Gems' life and work that deserves attention is that she did not consider playwriting a full-time job and a source of income. I reported in chapter two that she married a wealthy bourgeois, Keith Gems, who financially supported her and their children in the standard way family life in the postwar era. Her husband also supported the early stages of her playwriting by anonymously sponsoring her productions. This gave her an opportunity to experiment with forms and contents and to not be worried

[408] Please see Daniels, Sarah. *Plays, Two*. London: Methuen Drama, 1994; Page, Louise. *Plays: One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1990; and Wertenbaker, Timberlake. *Plays One*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

about the box office. The diversity of forms and contents in her dramatic work displays that she did not followed particular fashion.

Gems mostly wrote about subjects that she was passionate about and she thought they would entertain her viewers. Dominic Cavendish observed, "an unmissable feature of her work is passion: passion for her subject, and passion for the medium she has chosen, or which chose her."[409] Not following fashionable trends of writing also impacted her differently. Collaborative writing for a period of time became prevalent in theatre groups. It was a highly appreciated style in some women's theatre groups at their early stages, yet it was practiced by mixed ensembles as well. Gems, however, never wrote collaboratively. It was this aspect of her writing that made her turn down the offer of Joint Stock Company and therefore lost the chance to be produced at the Royal Court Theatre. Ann Jellicoe, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, Mary O'Malley, and Sarah Daniels are just handful of playwrights that were promoted by the Royal Court Theatre. Her collaboration with Royal Court could definitely become a solid platform for her further promotion.

Finally, Gems did not network well in theatre industry. She rarely attended celebrations held by theatre producers and administrators. Gems' son, Jonathan, a playwright himself, believed that "if you want to be a successful playwright in London you have to go to dinner parties. Everything is done at dinner parties. You can make appointments to go and see the head of programming or head of the drama but you won't get anywhere. But if you go to a dinner party it's a whole different story. That is where all the decisions are made, that is where everything happens." One of the reasons that she

[409] In an interview with Dominic Cavendish published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 6 March 2006.

did not publicize her work was her family. In an interview with Naim Attallah, she noted: "I'm inclined to think that success is far more dangerous, more corruption, than hardship. One of the reasons I have never gone in for publicity, which I could easily have done, particularly when I was younger, is because I thought it would be bad for my children. I've seen the children of people who are famous, and they don't do well."[410] Gems made a bohemia for herself at her home. She rarely left her sanctuary but she was frequently visited by her friends, journalists and theatre scholars. Scholar Lesley Ferris recalled, "I was directing *Queen Christina* [at Middlesex University] […] I invited Pam Gems, I had a little budget that I could have brought her to campus and given her an honorarium. She was very sweet and lovely and she said, 'no I don't want to come to campus but you and your students can come to my house.' I was like, Wow! What an offer. And I'm fairly sure she also said, 'and I don't expect any money. I'd be delighted to talk about that play with your students and you.'" [411] This quality of Gems highlights the level of her willingness to talk with young generations of students and theatre lovers about her works despite all the unpleasant attitudes that she encountered during her playwriting career. In the next chapter, I will explain different ways that can bring Gems back on the map of theatre discourse and juxtapose her next to other major contemporary women playwrights.

[410] Qtd in Attallah, Naim. *Dialogues*. London: Quartet, 2000. p. 123.
[411] In an interview with the author.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Retrieving Pam Gems

Biographies are, to use Nick Salvatore's words, "rooted in ideas and events larger than the individual subject."[412] Gems' biography is no exception. In this research, apart from exploring Gems' life and style of writing, I attempted to depict how the socio-political and literary changes in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century impacted Gems' mindset and career. Gems contributed to the formation and development of women's theatre and the modern British stage at large. Yet, given the impact or her plays and scope of her contribution, comparatively little attention has been given to her.

Gems' body of work is a mélange of forms and subjects. She was pioneering in practicing new styles of writing. In chapter four, I discussed her use and development of a filmic style in plays like *Piaf* and *Camille* in which conventions of realism were interwoven with Brechtian techniques such as songs, jump cuts, and fragmentary montage-like scenes. Regarding form, she noted that "form is a complicated game. I don't always write in the same genre, which baffles people. They tend to want tram-lines and to know where they are with a writer but I'm not interested in writing like that."[413] Elsewhere she commented, "I have such reverence for writers who are true explorers, who break form and content, who have that generosity which breeds vitality. And a particular fear of writing which finds it necessary to beat the drum, lay down party lines –

[412] Salvatore, Nick. "Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship." *Labour History*. (2004): 187-192. p. 189.

[413] Lyn Gardner, "Precious Gems", *Plays and Players*, 32 (1985), p 12-13.

the fashionable stuff."[414] A broader consideration of her work reveals that her interests with form is also apparent in the final moments of her plays as well. Gems, to quote Susan Carlson, "reinterprets theatre structures so that the disproportionate power of conclusions works for, not against, women and others on the margin of society."[415] By bending dramatic tensions to benefit women, and by giving the essential, fundamental decision to a female character, Gems attempted to redress the gender imbalance in British drama and to make the theatre an avenue for social change.

Coming from the working-class, and deeply conscious of her gender, Gems approached her subjects from a female perspective, one that was often embedded in class. Yet, she did not sacrifice entertainment for the sake of feminist or socialist ideologies. She understood that her writing could embrace multiple layers of meaning. She primarily chose her subjects from history as a means of exploring, and reflecting upon contemporary society. This is best exemplified in her biographical dramas like *Piaf*, *Queen Christina*, and *Marlene* as we have seen. As Katherine Worth observed, Gems was able to "dig up the old myths about women and re-root them in the new soil of our time,"[416] in order to represent the concerns that 'women' faced throughout history. In an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Gems explained the importance of drawing from the historical records: "all the stories have been told long ago. Your job is retelling. Relighting. You have a number of weapons as a dramatist . . . humor, suspense,

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[414] Qtd in Wandor, Michelene, *On Gender and Writing*. p. 150.

[415] Carlson, Susan. "Revisionary Endings: Pam Gems's Aunt Mary and Camille," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989, 103-117. p. 103.

[416] Worth, Katherine. "Images of Women in Modern English Theatre," in *Feminine Focus: The New Woman Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. p. 6.

sexual attraction . . . anything to make people come alive."[417] Gems realized that influential historical figures, decades or even centuries after their careers, still kindle public interest. The adventures and sometimes mysterious lives of them surpass the routine experiences of ordinary people and keep the audiences hopeful to transcend their daily obsessions for two hours of show-time. Gems dramatized women who were socially or psychologically complicated and were independent in their choices - going against external pressures - like Queen Christina of Sweden, Rosa Luxemburg, Buzz Goodbody, Dolores Ibarruri, and Edith Piaf. Gems even took risks in reworking the myths that cultural institutions such as Hollywood perpetuated. Staging women like Garbo and Dietrich was in many ways a critique of the endless and ongoing mythmaking of star power and money-making.

Writing for more than five decades, Gems was conscious to pin her plays down at the major confluences of British politics, theater, and what I call 'literary fashion'[418]. In 1976, *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* stood out among other women's works as an early feminist play that became commercially successful, transferring from the Edinburg fringe to the West End. This success gave a signal to other women playwrights, who found strength in the Women's Movement, that they were able to transcend small alternative theatres and compete with men on commercial stages. In 1984, with *Camille*, Gems questioned the restrictive materialist tendencies of Thatcherite era. Besides the

[417] Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig. *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987. p. 204.

[418] A fashion/style of writing that some writers follow to absorb the emerging artistic aura of the time. It may pass the test of time or not; if it passes, it becomes part of canon for the following generations like "in-yer-face" genre. If not, it will be wiped out of the mainstream history and will be marginalized like futurist dramas of Filippo Thommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922).

dramatization of Armand Duval's and Marguerite Gautier's relationship, Gems articulated the detrimental effects of Thatcher's policies. In 1996, *Stanley* was produced at a time when a new style of drama, "in-yer-face" theater[419], was popular and widely practiced by younger playwrights. A new wave of 'angry young men' emerged and found popularity also during 1990s, the era of Cool Britannia, including Martin McDonagh, Anthony Neilson, Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, and Mark Ravenhill. Despite the popularity of these new fashions, Gems' *Stanley* was a resounding success, written in her signature biographical style, winning the Olivier Award for best play, transferred to Broadway, and was nominated for the Tony Award.

Yet, the dialectical relationship of politics, theatre, and 'literary fashion' generated exclusive discourses that eventually unpinned Gems from her deserved place on the map of theatre scholarship. In the following I will briefly map the changes that women/feminist theater has gone through in the last three decades of twentieth century and how Gems situates within it. At first glance, Gems does not easily fit in either alternative feminist theatre nor into the mainstream, though she bridges the two**.** Gems' long, continuous and productive theatrical presence allowed her to experience different generations of writers and various feminisms.

During the 1970s, influenced by the lively spirit of the Women's Movement, feminist theatre mostly tended to do consciousness-raising, informing women of their social, political, and sexual rights. It provoked women to contemplate and reconsider their roles in society and in their relationship with men. Gems, however, was perhaps less

[419] This term was coined by the critic Aleks Sierz as the title of his book *In-Yer-Face Theater: British Drama Today* (2001).

skeptical than other writers towards relationships between men and women in her works. Perhaps it was her generation that made her less iconoclastic when she started writing. In Gems' work, women are not utterly content unless they are in mindful relationships with the society at large, and for success, they do not abandon family and children. Especially, the 'will to be a [good] mother' is substantial in Gems' dramaturgy. In *Go West Young Woman, Dusa…, Queen Christina*, and in many other later plays like *Camille*, *Dusa…*, and *Deborah's Daughter,* Gems evaluated this quality of women. For Gems, motherhood is an inseparable constituent of women whose negligence would cause public and private imbalances. Gems' tendency towards family and motherhood led some critics to conclude that she had a 'dual vision' towards women [see Aston (2000)[420]] and that her female protagonists are 'victim-heroines' [see Innes (1992)[421]].

Feminist theatre of the 1980s was hugely influenced by the impact of Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) in which she examined the role of class and opportunity for women across generations. The opening scene is a case in point. Marlene, the play's protagonist, throws a celebratory dinner party to celebrate her promotion to manager of a job agency. The guests include a variety of women—both real and fictional—from different centuries of time and varying cultures. Marlene, as Joseph Marohl argues, "regards her career advancement as beneficial to women everywhere and herself as an independent, self-made person, in the same mold as Margaret Thatcher."[422] Yet the women at the dinner

[420] Aston, Elaine. "Pam Gems: Body Politics and Biography" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston, and Janelle G. Reinelt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[421] Innes, Christopher. *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[422] Ibid, 379.

party reveal a range of ill treatment, misogyny, and hateful encounters they have experienced. The play moves away from the fantasy party to the early 1980's London. The narrative reveals that Marlene, despite her stylish self-presentation and sense of entitlement, is a working class 'girl made good'. Marlene in not afraid to sacrifice her family for her personal success including her own daughter Angie, who is being raised by her sister Joyce.

Top Girls attracted critics and scholars' attention in part because of its critique of priggish individualism and market capitalism promoted by Thatcher and the Conservative Party. But also, like Gems, Churchill was creating her own dramaturgical interventions with overlapping dialogue, use of non-linear time, and narratives that concentrated on roles of women. She became known for including girl characters in her plays and like Gems many of her roles were women from history. But another important attraction to Churchill's work is that it is overtly political. Lesley Ferris explains that "[b]y celebrating the new morality and economic vision of Thatcher and Reagan, Marlene isolates herself from her family and loses any sense of compassion and humanity."[423]

It is a further consideration that while the Royal Shakespeare Company was a home for Pam Gems' award-winning plays, the Royal Court Theatre was Churchill's. The lineage of those powerhouses of production is extremely different. The RSC has deep cultural roots and is hardly considered 'political' in nature, and in many ways 'history' is their focus, whether it is another production of one of Shakespeare's history

[423] Ferris, Lesley. *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*. New York: New York University Press, 1990. p. 170.

plays or plays like Gems' feminist history plays that provided a useful and productive way for that company to connect to new writers.

Centrality and circularity of *Top Girls*' discussion in academic discourse of the 1980s in some ways subordinated other playwrights including Gems. Yet, the discursive and administrative changes in feminist theater was more conspicuous during the 1990s. As Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt observed, women began to disunite soon after the Women's Liberation Movement [WLM]. Aston and Reinelt remarked that "as the decade progressed the WLM became increasingly fragmented. Internal debate focused on the communities and experiences of women overlooked by its middle-class, white agenda. In brief, what begins with the promise of a 'democratic opening', ends in reactionary closure, marked by the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher." [424] I discussed in chapter five that early feminist theatre scholars such as Itzin and Keyssar labeled a work 'feminist' if it was in accordance with socialist ideology and was advocating for women's politics – especially demands that were directly drawn from Women's Movement. This early definition of feminist theatre became almost non-functional during the 1990s due to the shortage of plays advocating direct socialist/feminist goals.

As Elaine Aston wrote, "since 1970s years of the Women's Liberation Movement, it is undoubtedly the case that feminism increasingly has failed to impress younger generations of women."[425] Feminist theatre experienced the same backlash. In a

[424] Aston, Elaine, and Janelle G. Reinelt. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 13.

[425] Aston, Elaine. "Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. p 18.

group interview with number of playwrights including Churchill, Gems, Wandor, and Tina Brown[426] in 1977, the latter answered to Ann McFerran's question that if male-dominated theatre discriminated between men and women as such: "I should think discrimination works in our favour at the moment. They're so desperate for women writers that we're probably going to get grisly, unfair publicity and be rather spoilt when some luckless man who's been grinding away 15 plays a year doesn't get a chance."[427] This interest in women's plays in the 1970s and 1980s subsided by the 1990s as they failed in "capturing the zeitgeist of fashion."[428] The era of Cool Britannia coincided with the emergence of a new 'angry young men' including Martin McDonagh, Anthony Neilson, Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, and Mark Ravenhill, whose radical plays marginalized women's works on the map of new plays again.

Another issue related to the staging of women's plays is the director. A lot of women directors, as Stephenson and Langridge wrote, "frequently choose to stage the work of male playwrights or go with the classics."[429] The backlash against feminist theater was aggravated by women's internal conflicts. Timberlake Wertenbaker observed that "there are a lot of women who don't particularly want to see what women are

[426] Tina Brown is mostly known for her journalistic work. However, during the 1970s she wrote some plays for the London fringe including *Under the Bamboo Tree* (1974) and *Happy Yellow* (1977). The latter was produced by the Bush Theatre.

[427] In an interview with Ann McFerran, "The Theatre's (Somewhat) Angry Young Women," *Time Out*, October 1977. p. 13.

[428] Stephenson, Heidi, and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997. p. xi.

[429] Stephenson, Heidi, and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997. p. xi.

writing."[430] Perhaps conducting a comprehensive oral history about the priorities of contemporary women directors could shed light on this aspect of women's theatre. However, it must be noted that these interviews were conducted over a decade ago.

Gems was not the only woman playwright who objected to both the term 'political' and 'feminist' in relation to her work. Sarah Kane also objected. Kane in an interview in 1997 stated that: "My only responsibility as a writer is to the truth, however, unpleasant that truth may be. I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing. When people talk about the me as a writer, that's what I am, and that's how I want my work to be judged – on its quality, not on the basis of my age, gender, class, sexuality or race."[431] According to Aston, "from the mid-1990s to the present, attachments to feminism are not explicitly made by contemporary women dramatists, and neither do they advocate a 'new' kind feminism. Instead, their work lays claim to a renewal of feminism through the adoption of various dramaturgies and aesthetics that work affectively on audiences so that they might feel the loss of feminism."[432] To re-boost the feminist theatre, Aston suggests disinterring playwrights like Sarah Kane and debbie tucker green from their position in the canon of "in-yer-face" – shocking and taboo breaking – theatre and make a cross-generational connection between them and their feminist precursors – particularly Caryl Churchill.

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[430] In an interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997. p. 138.

[431] In an interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997. p. 134.

[432] Aston, Elaine. "Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. p 19.

Yet, what caught my attention is not Aston's suggestion of appropriation of existent works, which are not necessarily 'feminist', to fuel the feminist theatre that was not, despite the increase in the number of women playwrights, moving as fast as it was in the 1970s and 1980s. What interested me most is that Aston juxtaposes Gems and Kane and benefits from two quotations from different historical contexts. Aston reported that Gems has said that a "feminist writer is absolutely meaningless." However, she does not provide the rest of Gems' statement in which she had added "because it implies polemic and polemic is about changing things in a direct way. Drama is Subversive."[433] It is strange to see that Aston juxtaposes Gems and Kane in the excerpt above as Gems' statement was from 1977 and Kane voiced her belief twenty years later in in 1997. Not to mention that Gems qualified her statement in an interview with Lizbeth Goodman in 1993 as follows: "being labeled feminist creates disadvantages for the artist. But what is the alternative when you seek a just society? [...] I do not question the relevance of the word feminist to my work. The feminist outlook was my springboard."[434] Aston neglected this reiteration of Gems and made a reverse claim by truncating the full statement. Aston immediately after quoting Gems restates Churchill's view about feminist writing in italics – to make it distinct with the rest if the text – and claimed: "this distinction is important, because it draws attention to the difference between theatre that is 'ism' or issue-based, and playwriting, such as Churchill's, where feminist impressions

[433] In an interview with Ann McFerran, "The Theatre's (Somewhat) Angry Young Women," *Time Out*, October 1977. p. 13.

[434] Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 16.

are formed dramaturgically rather than polemically."[435] Churchill's view about feminist writing was in the same interview with Ann McFerran in 1977. Churchill said, "What I feel is quite strongly a feminist position and that inevitably comes into what I write."[436] This is a good example of maintaining animus against Gems in contemporary scholarship. Aston cuts Gems' quote and attributes the quality of her writing to Churchill who openly declares the role of politics in her writing. Such attitude towards Gems is a complicated story. Although at the onset of feminist theatre, scholars recognized her significance, they gradually drove her out of the critical discourse and anthologies as I discussed in the previous chapter

Change of status in the canon of drama happens gradually and very slowly, especially for women. Yet, I hope with more revival of Gems plays, more research and documentaries like the one I conducted and produced, Gems will have a future renaissance and her once-canonical place will be reclaimed. Despite the considerable number of plays and the substantial and noteworthy success of many of her works, only the most commercially successful ones have been written about and revived in the past few years. This limited use of her work avoids a comprehensive examination of her dramatic philosophy and her dramaturgical styles.

It seems a fresh spirit of interest among some scholars and theatre practitioners alike is rising. On September 18, 2017, The Royal Central of School of Speech and

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[435] Aston, Elaine. "Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting," in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Into the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. p 18.

[436] In an interview with Ann McFerran, "The Theatre's (Somewhat) Angry Young Women," *Time Out*, October 1977. p. 13.

Drama in collaboration with Palindrome Productions and Unfinished Histories screened my interview with Jane Lapotaire and produced stage readings of Gems' *After Birthday* and *My Warren*. In February 2018, Unfinished Histories gave a stage reading of Gems' *Arthur and Guinevere, My Name is Rosa Luxemburg*, and *The Project*. In April 2018, a workshop performance of one of Gems' late plays---*Winterlove*— took place at the Omnibus Theatre in Clapham, London with a view to launching a tour. These recent events bring hope for a revival of productions of her plays to join a clear, glowing sense of new interest in her work. I end this with a quote from Lyn Gardner's obituary in *The Guardian* on May 16, 2011 which captures in a few words the impact and legacy of Pam Gems:

> Like the characters in *Go West, Young Woman*, Gems was undoubtedly a pioneer, storming theatre's main stages at a time when Agatha Christie was still the most frequently performed female playwright in Britain. Often a lone voice in a predominantly male theatre world, she showed the way for subsequent generations of female playwrights, proving that it is possible to be popular and pungent at the same time.[437]

[437] Gardner, Lyn. "Pam Gems Obituary," *The Guardian*, 16 May 2011.

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Appendix A: Chronology of Gems' Plays

Original Stage Plays

***Betty's Wonderful Christmas* (1972) -** It was performed at the Cockpit Theatre, London. It had Yvonne Antrobus as Betty in the title role. It was directed by Roland Rees.

***After Birthday* (1973)** and ***My Warren* (*Oh, Eileen*) (1973)** – They were performed as a double bill at the Almost Free Theatre. Both were directed by Peter James. Sheila Kelley and Janet Henfrey acted in *After Birthday* and *My Warren* respectively.

***The Amiable Courtship of Miss Venus and Wild Bill* (1973)** – This play was produced as one of the shows during the Women's Festival in 1973 at The Almost Free Theatre, Camden, London. Lindsay Ingram and Donald Sumpter acted Miz Venus and Wild Bill respectively.

***Go West Young Woman* (1974)** – It was the first production of Women's Company. It was first staged at the Roundhouse, at Chalk Farm, Camden, London. It was directed by Susan Todd and Ann Mitchell.

***The Project* (1974)** – It was staged at the Soho Poly Theatre. Nancy Meckler directed it. The cast were David Schofield (Frank), Jane Wood (Joanna), and Patti Love (Linda).

***Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1976)** - It was first produced with the title *Dead Fish* at the Edinburgh Festival. It then transferred to the Hampstead Theatre and finally to the Mayfair Theatre. The London productions were directed by Nancy Meckler and designed by Tanya McCallin. The London cast included Brigit Forsyth (Dusa), Alison Fiske (Fish), Diane Fletcher (Stats), and Mary Maddox (Violet).

***Queen Christina* (1977)** – It was first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. It was directed by Penny Cherns and designed by Di Seymour. It had Sheila Allen in the protagonist role. Among other cast members were Charlotte Cornwall (Ebba Spare), Bernard Brown (Chancellor Oxenstierna), Barry Rutter (King Gustavus Adolphus), Iain Mitchell (German Prince), Valerie Lush (Queen Mother), and Ian McNeice (Cardinal Azzolino).

***Franz into April* (1977)** – After being turned down by BBC to be "too rude", this play was performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. It starred Warren Mitchell as Franz (based on Fritz Perl (1893-1970), pioneer of Gestalt Therapy) and Lise Hilboldt as April. The play was directed by Frank Hatherley.

***Piaf* (1978)** – It was originally performed at the Other Place. It was then presented at the Aldwych and Piccadilly Theatres before transferring to Broadway. It was directed by Howard Davies and designed by Douglas Heap. Jane Lapotaire starred as Edith Piaf. among other casts were Zoe Wanamaker (Toine), James Griffiths (Papa Luplée), Malcolm Storry (Marcel Marceau), and Anthony Higgins (Angelo). Gems's *Piaf* received multiple revivals: Peter Hall directed Elaine

Paige in 1993 and Jamie Lloyd directed Elena Rogers in 2008. Rogers won Laurence Olivier Award for her performance.

***Ladybird, Ladybird* (1979)** – it was produced at the King's Head Theatre as a double bill with *Sandra* (a revised version of *After Birthday*). Sue Parrish directed this show. Carole Harrison portrayed Sandra. Janet Henfrey acted Mrs. Ashley in *Ladybird, Ladybird*. Philip Croskin and Angela Carroll respectively acted Dan and Jenny Fletcher.

***Arthur and Guinevere* (1979)** - the RSC produced Gems' *Guinevere* in its Gulbenkian Studio, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There is little information about the production available except the cast information that included Conrad Asquith as Arthur and Suzanne Bishop as Guinevere.

***Up in Sweden* (1980)** – It was produced at the King's Head Theatre. Andrew Hall played the lead role Hans. The show was directed by Clare Davidson.

***The Treat* (1982)** - Before turning into a film, the play was put on at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, directed by Philip Davis. The cast included Frances Barber, Tracy Boden, Jenny Galloway, Tim Stern, and Timothy Spall.

***Aunt Mary* (1982)** - Directed by Robert Walker, the play was produced at the Warehouse Theatre, London. The show was designed by David Fielding and had Charlie Paton (Mary), Barry Jackson (Cyst), Patricia Quinn (Alison), Timothy Spall (Martin), Ann Way (Muriel) and Peter Attard (Jack) in the cast.

***Loving Women* (1984)** - It was produced at the Arts Theatre, directed by Phillip Davis and designed by Jonathan Gems, and with the following cast: Marion Bailey (Susannah), David Beames (Frank), Gwyneth Strong (Crystal).

***Pasionaria* (1985)** – Directed by Sue Dunderdale, the play was pun on at the Playhouse Theatre, Newcastle. Paul Sand composed the music and Alexandra Byrne designed the set. The cast included Denise Black (La Pasionaria – Dolores Ibarruri), Richard Albert (Senor Lopez), Richard Cordery (Mine Manager), Shay Gorman (Dolores' father), and Daniel Hill (Dolores' husband).

***Deborah's Daughter* (1994)** - Directed by Sue Dunderdale, this play was premiered at the Library Theatre, Manchester. The cast was Anna Carteret (Deborah Pederson), Jane Freeman (Rhoda, Lady Wiggins), Mia Fothergil (Stephanie Pederson), and Raad Rawi (Hassan Sa'id).

***Stanley* (1996)** - First staged at the National Theatre, it was directed by John Caird and designed by Tim Hatley. It had the following in the cast: Deborah Findlay (Hilda), Anthony Sher (Stanley), Anna Chancellor (Patricia), and Selina Cadell (Dorothy). The production subsequently transferred to The Circle in The Square Theatre in Broadway.

***Marlene* (1996)** – It was first produced at the Oldham Coliseum Theatre and then was presented at the Lyric Theatre. It was directed by Sean Mathias and designed by Michael Vale. The cast included Siân Phillips (Marlene Dietrich), Lou Gish (Vivian Hoffman), and Billy Mathias (Mutti).

***The Snow Palace* (1998)** - Produced by The Sphinx Theatre Company, it was staged at the Tricycle Theatre. It was directed by Janet Suzman with the cast of Kathryn Pogson (Stanislawa), Nigel Cooke (Robespierre), Mark Lewis Jones (Danton), Justin Avoth (Saint-Just).

***Nelson* (2005)** – Directed by Patrick Sandford, it was staged at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton. The cast included Stephen Noonan (Horatio Nelson) and Hannah Barrie (Fanny Nisbet).

***Mrs. Pat* (2006)** --- It was produced at the Theatre Royal, York. Directed by Sue Dunderdale, it has Isla Blair in the title role.

Adaptations

***My Name Is Rosa Luxembourg* (1976)** - Translated and adapted Marianne Auricoste's play in French. It was produced at the Soho Poly Theatre and was directed by Susan Todd. Ann Mitchell played the title role.

***Rivers and Forests* (1976)** – Translation of Marguerite Duras's work in French. It was performed at the Soho Poly Theatre.

***Uncle Vanya* (1979)** – Directed by Nancy Meckler, Gems' version of Chekhov's play was first produced at the Hampstead Theatre with Nigel Hawthorne as Uncle Vanya (Ivan Petrovich). In 1982, it was performed at the National Theatre under direction of Michael Bogdanov with Michael Bryant in the lead role. Kenneth Branagh revived the play in 1990 at the Riverside Theatre with Richard Briars as

Ivan Petrovich. In 1992, it was re-staged at the National Theatre again. Sean Mathias directed it with Ian McKellen in the title role.

A Doll's House **(1980)** – Adaptation of Henrik Ibsen, this play was performed at the Tyne-Wear Theatre, Newcastle.

Camille **(1984)** – Based on *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*, this adaptation was produced by the RSC at The Other Place. Directed by Ron Daniels, it had Frances Barber as Marguerite Gaultier.

The Cherry Orchard **(1984)** – It was first staged at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. Directed by Nancy Meckler, it had in the cast Benjamin Whitrow (Gayev), Susan Engel (Lyuba Ravensky), Alfred Molina (Yepichodov), Linda Bassett (Varya), Anthony Allen (Yasha), Godfrey Kenton (Firs). In 2007, it was revived at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield under the direction of Jonathan Miller with Joanna Lumley as Ranevskaya, Timothy Bateson as Firs, Peter Eyre as Gayev and Lisa Dillon as Varya.

The Danton Affair **(1986)** - It was produced by the RSC at the Barbican Theatre, London. It was directed by Ron Daniels and had Brian Cox (Danton) and Ian McDiarmid (Robespierre) in the cast.

The Blue Angel **(1991)** - Based on the Heinrich Mann's novel, this version was produced by the RSC at the Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon before transferring to The Globe Theatre, London. It was directed by Trevor Nunn and had Kelly Hunter as the lead role Lola Lola. Philip Madoc acted as Professor Raat.

***Ghosts* (1993)** – Performed at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, this adaptation of Ibsen's play was directed by Sean Mathias with the cast of Sian Phillips (Mrs Alving), Dorien Thomas (Engstrand), Lisa Palfrey (Regine), John Quentin (Pastor Manders), and Brendan O'Hea (Osvald).

***The Seagull* (1994)** – This adaptation of Chekhov's play was staged at the National Theatre. Directed by John Caird, the cast were Judi Dench (Arkadina), Norman Rodway (Sorin), Edward Petherbridge (Dorn), Alan Cox (Konstantin), Helen McCrory (Nina), and Bill Nighy (Trigorin).

***Yerma* (2003)** – Adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's work, it was directed by Helena Kaut-Howson at the Royal Exchange Theater, Manchester. Denise Black starred as Yerma.

***The Lady from the Sea* (2003)** – staged at the Almeida Theatre, the adaptation of Ibsen's play was directed by Trevor Nunn. The cast included John Bowe (Wangel), Natasha Richardson (Ellida), Claudia Blakely (Bolette), Louis Clein (Hilde), Tim McInnerny (Arnholm), Benedict Cumberbatch (Lyngstrand), and Geoffrey Hutchings (Ballested).

***The Little Mermaid* (2004)** – Produced by The Sphinx Theatre Company, this adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's play was presented at the Greenwich Theatre. Sue Parrish directed it with Lydia Fox as Undine.

<u>Other works</u>

The Leg-Up (Radio Play) (1958)

A Question of Temper (TV play) (1960)

A Builder by Trade (TV Play) (1962)

The Miss Harts Go South (Radio Play) (1962)

Mr. Watts is Very Fond of that Lorry (TV Play) (1963)

The Synonym (TV Play) (1964)

The Whippet (TV Play) (1965)

The Burning Man (TV Play) (1965)

The Russian Princess (TV Play) (1966)

The Nourishing Lie (TV Play) (1966)

What Luck (TV Play) (1966)

In Donegal… In Donegal (TV Play) (1966)

In the Hothouse (TV Play) (1967)

Cluster (TV Play) (1967)

Down West (TV Play) (1967)

The Country House Sale (TV Play) (1968)

You Should be Pleased He Like Me (TV Play) (1971)

Mrs Frampton (novel) (1989)

Bon Voyage, Mrs Frampton (novel) (1990)

Stanley's Women (screenplay) (1999)

Finchie's War (screenplay) (2001)

Appendix B: Interviews' Transcripts

The following interviews took place in the summer of 2015 in London, except the one with Lesley Ferris that was conducted in 2016 in Columbus, Ohio. My interviewees were either Gems' family or artists who closely worked with her in the capacity of directors or actresses. The rationale for the selection of my interviewees was that majority of these people established long-lasting relationships with Gems and therefore could provide deep insights about her attitudes during their productions as well as her personal life. Unfortunately, when I began this research, Gems had already passed away and I never had the opportunity to meet and talk to her in person. These interviews provided me with fresh memories of Gems as those who worked with her and knew her shared their invaluable experiences. My recordings to date include interviews with Sue Dunderdale [director and joint literary executor of Gems' estate], Penny Cherns and Nancy Meckler [directors], Keith, David and Jonathan Gems [Gems' husband and sons], Jane Lapotaire and Denise Black [actresses who had major roles in Gems' productions], Sue Parrish [director and the artistic director of Sphinx Theatre Company], and Lesley Ferris [director and scholar]. Others were interested in talking to me about their work with Gems, but their schedules did not align with mine. These included Anthony Sher, John Caird, Frances Barber, and Trudie Styler. As I continue to pursue my work on

British theatre and Pam Gems, I hope to be able to talk to them in the future to add these other voices to my research on Gems.

Interview with Jane Lapotaire[438]

Jane Lapotaire starred as Edith Piaf in the first production of Gems' *Piaf* (1978). With this role, Lapotaire won the Tony Award, The Society of West End Theatre Award (now The Laurence Olivier Award), The Variety Club of Great Britain Award, and *Plays and Players*' Award for the best actress. This interview took place at Lapotaire's home in London on 29 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Jane, I am very glad to see you're back on stage after a thirteen-year gap. Fortunately, you recovered from your major brain hemorrhage?

Jane Lapotaire: It was an aneurysm in the middle cerebral artery, and fortunately I was in France, and the French are some of the best brain surgeons in the world. Completely, miraculously they saved my life.

EN: Thank God for having you. Jane, do you remember when you met Pam for the first time?

JL: well, I didn't meet Pam for the first time that I knew about her work. I came across a one act play about Arthur and Guinevere, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. It

[438] A version of this interview has been published by *New Theatre Quarterly* in August 2017 issue: Najar, Esmaeil, "Two Women and an International Success: Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*."

was a real feminist attack on Guinevere's behalf about why she is being turned into this kind of doll queen as if she has to be decorated and prettified to emphasize his prowess and his power as a king. And I badly wanted to do it and somehow, and I can't remember how, I wrote to Pam and said, "please turn it into a full-length play" --- "oh darling" she said "I don't think I can, I've wanted to, you know, extend it but it never really worked out" – so it was a difficult piece to get done. It never happened but I just loved it. When the chance came of being interviewed to play Piaf[439], I jumped at it. I got to know Pam; I suppose, as we began to run the play quite late in rehearsals. I had asked for her not to be at rehearsals originally because I was unable to align the 'cockney' that the role was written in, with the little I knew about Parisian slang and Piaf's essential Frenchness. She must have come to some dress rehearsals and the warmth that is in the play about this little tramp who had this amazing voice and refused to be packaged by male producers in a titillating way was very evident the minute Pam walked in the room. Here was a woman who was huge in her generosity, utterly committed in her feminism, and loyal to her working class understanding.

EN: What was the rehearsal process like for *Piaf*?

JL: I'd read the script, and there were originally thirty-six songs in it! [she laughs]. Well, I mean Patti LuPone couldn't sing thirty-six songs and I am not a singer but I went and interviewed with Howard Davies, the director, and that all went fine. I said 'look, I am not French speaking by birth!' My step father Lapotaire (I took his name) was Parisian

[439] *Piaf* was originally staged at The Other Place in 1978 and was directed by Howard Davies with Jane Lapotaire in the title-role of Edith Piaf (1915-1963). With *Piaf* Lapotaire won the Tony Award, The Society of West End Theatre Award (now The Laurence Olivier Award), The Variety Club of Great Britain Award, and Plays and Players Award for the best actress.

and thank god he was still alive then, because he helped me understand some of the Parisian slang that is in a lot of the songs that Piaf sings early on in the play. Of course, for me the big terror was singing. I don't sing except in the bath [she laughs]. One day we were rehearsing it in Stratford at the Methodist church hall, up the road from the theatre, and I said to Zoe Wanamaker: 'hey, the ladies' lavatory sounds a really good place to sing! The acoustics are amazing.' So, she went back to rehearsal room and said to Howard 'Ok, forget doing it at The Other Place, we are doing it in the ladies' loo in the Methodist church hall' [she laughs]. Singing was always a total dread for me. I took singing lessons for six months before we started the play, because I thought I've got to know these songs inside out, so I feel confident. Well, I would never feel confident about these songs, I would go 'text, text, text, oh we're getting near songs, oh God, I've got to sing, sing, sing. Thank God that's over, back to the text.' I had to learn how to manage my voice in a very different way to just speaking the play.

EN: Piaf speaks English in Pam's version. How did you digest this?

JL: I am glad that I didn't meet Pam for quite a long time, because it was very hard for me, my own thought, to think of Piaf speaking English! And also to think of Piaf speaking English with a cockney accent [she laughs]. And I fumed and boiled and raged inside [she continues laughing]. Because the minute I thought I had to talk like that [she speaks with cockney accent], my French knowledge of Piaf was obliterated. I had read every book that had been written about her; I went to the British Film Institute to see all the news reels. I spent a whole day at the BFI looking at every film that she had made, every bit of news reel that they had of her, and in no small way I began to loathe the woman who had written this play [she laughs loudly] because every time I opened my

mouth, all the 'Frenchness' about Piaf disappeared. I said to Howard one day "please, can I just play it straight for today? Please just let me play it in my own, you know, middle of the road, flat, what they call now RP- 'received pronunciation'- (which they didn't call it in my day at drama school – it was just the way everyone aspired to speak then. This was the way everybody talked).

Of course, Pam was right; the minute I spoke Piaf with the middle of the road - middle class – English accent, Piaf died a death. She wasn't this girl who'd been born on a pavement to a prostitute, whose father was a juggler. She now became the English middle class [she laughs]. And I said OK Pam, you're right. Pam understood the roughness of Piaf. It was an extraordinary voice. And extraordinary voice coming out of this little misshapen, ugly waif.

EN: Piaf has a multidimensional character, which is very difficult to enact. How did you master this? What were some of the difficulties?

JL: Peter Brook gave me the biggest tip about playing Piaf because of course she never performed in England. He saw her at the Olympia in Paris. He said there were two women; there was 'the woman who walked from the wings to the microphone, and there was the woman who sang.' And of course, that was the most wonderful note for me. Because it separated the woman from the performer. I suffered for the first time in my life stage fright. I don't mean nerves. Nerves aren't stage frights. Stage fright is when you cannot get on the stage. I locked myself in the ladies' lavatory on the first dress rehearsal. Because it was just such an enormous mountain range I was going to have to climb and terrified I couldn't, I was paralyzed with fear and was unable to move. They banged on the door. They sent Zoë to beg me to come out. I'd never been so terrified in my life. Zoë

always says I was brave, but she forgets the time I shut myself in the ladies' lavatory and I wouldn't come out. I don't think I ever did a performance of that play without experiencing fear largely because of the songs, but also because it was a two-and-a-half-hour heavy drama as well as the singing and I knew it would cost me physically, which it did.

EN: If I am not mistaken *Piaf* was the first play produced by RSC that ended up in the West End and then to Broadway. Am I right?

JL: Yes, absolutely. We went from The Other Place in Stratford to the RSC's other theatre in London which was originally what is now The Donmar. Then we transferred again and played a straight run at Wyndham's – which was perfect because it's a small gem of Georgian theatre - holds about 500 people. Then we moved to the Piccadilly theatre, which was a nightmare for me because it is a huge barn of a place. And *Piaf* is an intimate play. The power of the play is really effective when the theatre is small. After we played Piccadilly we were then approached to go to New York. I said I don't want to go to New York. I really don't want to go to New York. I can only play this play in repertoire with nights off. If you make me play it all the time, it will kill me. It's like the Himalayas and I am not the professional singer. So, I had to fight every step of the way to negotiate a schedule that wouldn't make me fall at the first post. Eventually after a lot of haggling, I got it down to seven performances not the eight. But even then, it was a struggle. I am an actor not a singer. No singer does seven performances, but the one thing that got me through it was that Pam had chosen initially and then Howard the director had selected songs that were narratives, so I could approach them as an actor. The songs told a story. I could tell the story and not worry about what I sounded like.

EN: Was it different playing *Piaf* in England than in the United States?

JL: It was much more difficult playing *Piaf* in America, because they don't understand the concept of a drama with songs—*Piaf* wasn't a musical; the songs were chosen as a kind of contrapuntal emphasis to the dialogue or she'd sing – she would sing about beautiful love "La vie en Rose" – you know love with rose colored spectacles and then she'd shoot up! We added "La vie en Rose" song in NYC so that American audiences could identify her. What a role – what a wonderful role, the best role I had in my entire life. But it cost physically – I lost the use of my arm for a year – in fact I had to play the last month of *Piaf* with my right arm on my hip and only gesture with my left hand. Doing the drug withdrawal fit seven times a week split the nerves in my right shoulder blade. My right arm became useless. So, when we gestured to the accordionist, the double bassist, and the pianist, I had to do that [she shows how she moved her right hand with the help of her left one], and all the company at the curtain call did that as well [she laughs]. Usually I sang my first song to the sound of seats banging as all the blue-rinsed, white haired fur coated ladies from New Jersey left. Because as you know the opening line of the play - at the end of her life when she is so drunk and so high on morphine that she could hardly walk and the manager of the theatre tries to get her off - was 'get your fucking hands off me. I ain't done nothing yet.' And you could hear the gasps. As you know, I love America, and I've had some of my happiest times in in America teaching at Washington University in Saint Louis, but scratch an American and they're very, very prudish underneath. For instance, I was interviewed about the 'urination scene' and I sent up a few journalists saying 'oh, the scene where I pee on the floor like the Piaf did?' (Papa Leplee, the night club owner where she first sang invited her to his table and not

realizing, after having eaten the fish - whatever it was – you wash your hands with the water that's got lemon in it, she drank it, they laughed at her. She said to the waiter 'you think that's funny, watch this:' and she peed on the floor). I used to tell journalists, 'well at four o'clock I have a liter of water and [she talks while laughing] at quarter to five I drink a pint of milk and then at quarter to seven have three Coca Colas. Just so that you know, at ten past eight it means I can pee on the floor.' I said it's a tube with a rubber bowl! I press on it, and water comes out! In fact, sometimes it used to leak in my shoe before I got to that point. Nobody in England, in the newspapers, had ever called it 'urination scene', ever. Nobody had really ever paid any attention to it. But when I got to America, frequently I was asked 'isn't that a Tad Riskaroo? [she laughs]. And that's why I love Pam. It's pretty shocking having a woman pee on stage.

EN: In 1981, you won the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play for *Piaf*?

JL: Yes. When we did the Tony Awards show, I was at the bottom of the bill in my secondhand black dress with my smeared lipstick. (We got rid of the wig early on in dress rehearsals because wig was doing the performance). I just screwed up my hair with kirby grips – you call them bobby pins in United States. And I was in dressing room with Angela Lansbury and Lena Horne in floor length sequins and fish tail gowns. And I was in this second-hand black dress from Oxfam. I took our beloved musical director Michael Dansicker because they'd asked me if I would sing a Piaf's song at the bottom of the bill before all the proper singers sang [she laughs]. And I did. And had no notion – not a hope in hell – I was up against Glenda Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, and Eva le Gallienne, who was like our Peggy Ashcroft. And I thought maybe Eva le Gallienne's bound to get it or Elizabeth Taylor. After that my working life changed to a different level. It was also of

course great for the RSC. I won three of the four English awards but I wouldn't ever win the Evening Standard Awards because they knew I was too left-wing [she laughs]. So, thank you Pam, wherever you are. And of course, she was over the moon that I'd won the Tony award for it.

EN: Where do you see Pam's role in your theatrical success?

JL: Pam Gems was the best thing that ever happened to me as an actor, because she gave me a chance to be a protagonist - to run the play. And I had never had experience of that before. Not even in Shakespeare. Rosalind is the third the size of Hamlet. And Queen Katherine of Aragon, nowhere near the size of Henry VIII or Wolsey. I mean, in most Shakespeare plays women are outnumbered eight to one. In fact, in *Piaf* we had to take care of the men [she laughs] because the boot was on the other foot - because it was a play about women. It was play about Piaf and her half-sister, about Piaf and her secretary, about Piaf and Marlene Dietrich, who used to walk her around to sober her up before she went on stage. She always wore the crucifix that Marlene had given her.

EN: *Queen Christina* (1977) and *Piaf* (1978), both by Pam Gems, brought women for the first time center stage in a well-established company like RSC, which was predominantly run by men. What were some challenges that actresses, especially you faced in those days?

JL: Well, don't forget, you know, I'd been in the company off and on since 1974. So, there were several chaps in the cast of *Piaf* that I knew and who I'd already worked with. There has only ever been one woman in the directorate. A woman called Buzz Goodbody who sadly died before I joined the company. But of course we did the play in the eighties - late seventies, 78-79 in England and 80-81 in America. Then by this time feminism had

even reached the shores of this little back water called, whatever you want to call it, no wonder we have an identity crisis, UK, Great Britain, England. It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. Wonderful. As leading women, we were very aware. We did have public audience paid discussions often in the Swan - one particularly with Juliet Stevenson, Fiona Shaw, and others, about the release actresses' experience of playing a britches role-playing a boy playing a girl playing a boy. And I think I can say quite safely that there wouldn't have been a leading actress in the RSC who wasn't a feminist. I'll tell you very sweet story that has nothing to do with Pam but Gregory Doran who is now the artistic director. I won an American award, (blowing my trumpet), for Katherine of Aragon, in Greg's production of Henry VIII in 1996. Perhaps my father was an American GI; There is something in me that American audiences really respond to. (Thank you, thank you, thank you). And Greg, who I love dearly, he is a great director, very humane, pays as much attention to the youngsters just out of drama school as he does to the leading actors. I said, Greg in this play called *Henry VIII* we have scenes titled 'Henry's Chamber,'-'Wolsey's party' [because as you know actors do not rehearse as Act I Scene II, scenes are given names], and the scene when Katherine of Aragon dies is called after the place where she dies, Kimbolton! And he laughed and said, point taken! And that was 1996. A considerable time after *Piaf.* As a leading female actor, you have as much clout as a male leading actor. And at that level of casting, you wouldn't be working with a male actor that you didn't get on with. We did as women in the *Piaf* cast go out of our way to make the men feel comfortable. Not least of all at The Other Place, we had to go through the dressing room to get to the women's room, all the women were together. So, there was lots of fun and games as we went through the men's dressing room. There was never

antagonism as such. But we knew that we were fighting on a very new and lonely plane. That as a leading lady if you - and I have experienced it playing Mary Magdalene on the radio, I actually queried something while we were recording, you know rehearsal record. And one of the men said oh for goodness sake just get on with it. And I said for goodness sake, I am playing Mary Magdalene, shut up!

EN: As you know, Pam did not receive enough attention in academia, and as some theatre practitioners like Sue Dunderdale and Jonathan Gems say, she was somewhat overlooked in British theatre. What do you think could be the reason for this?

JL: I think because she wasn't fashionable in any way either in her person or in her views. She was politically unfashionable. She was too left-wing. She was too 'feminist' for the mainstream. And because she was not Sarah Kane, 28-year-old with mental problems, rest her soul, she didn't fit neatly into any category. Also, her initial draft, I don't know what *Queen Christina* was like or *Stanley Spenser*, but *Piaf* was major editing. It was an unstructured rolling of a play. Pam herself was the first to admit it. We had no idea what style to play the thing in. In fact, it took us virtually the whole six-weeks of rehearsal to find out what style to play it in - the style discovered us rather than us discovering the style. So, anyone who worked on a Pam Gems script had to work hard as I am sure the directors you've interviewed would have said, to edit, on her own admission not her thing, the sprawling generosity of the text. During rehearsals as it was edited, you would discover a shape to it. You had to take Pam as she was, and for those of us who loved her, that was a very easy thing to do. Because she had so much heart and so much guts and so much courage, but she didn't fit into any fashionable niche for journalists or for producers. And she wrote about unfashionable things. And she wrote

with a – I mean I don't know how many swear words there are in *Piaf*, and obviously I shouldn't do any advertising, but when it was filmed, and I don't know which company filmed it, it sat on a shelf for years, because they didn't have the guts to show it on American television. And then another film company bought it and in order to make it palatable for an American audience, it had to be introduced by somebody, wearing a beret and a mac standing under a street light – (the only thing that was missing was a string of onions) - saying to Americans that you must be prepared, there are going to be very, very bad words used in this play. Please! And I say that loving America and loving working in America. I can't wait to go back to New York. But it does get very prudish about things like swear words. And I suppose it was that side of Pam that made people uncomfortable. But look what she gave her actors. Lord bless her soul. Oh, she'd probably say, "oh darling, I don't want any of that nonsense. Let's have a gin and tonic." Pam was a force to be reckoned with, and there weren't many women playwrights around. Caryl Churchill has always held her own but she tends to be, (and I love her work), academic. You know on the intellectual side. Pam was all heart. All heart. And all guts. When I opened the Guardian obituary and saw her name, I actually heard myself gasp. She was so full of life, so full of ideas, and so full of support for women who had it tough, that somewhere in the back of my mind I assumed that Pam couldn't die because she'd sit down and have a damn good discussion with death about why it was important she went on living. Actually, we were lucky that we had her as long as we did. And I must just say on film, I am thrilled that you are writing her biography. And I wish you well with it.

EN: Thank you Jane for dedicating your time for this interview and for all your supports.

Interview with Nancy Meckler[440]

Nancy Meckler collaborated with Pam Gems on multiple projects in the capacity of a director including *The Project* (1974*), Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1976), *Uncle Vanya* (1979), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1984). This interview took place at Meckler's home in London on 18 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Nancy, you began your work in theatre as an actress in the late 1960's but gradually shifted to directing and became an established director in the early 70s. This era was the time of the women's movement and the rise of the second wave of feminism. However, unlike other women in theatre, you did not join any women's theatre groups that at the time followed particular feminist goals. What could be your reason for that?

Nancy Meckler: I became a theatre director when I was in my twenties, and there were hardly any women theatre directors by then. There was Joan Littlewood and there was a woman who directed musicals whose name was Wendy Toye. And I had done some directing at university and in summer theatre but I did not think of becoming a director because I thought being a woman, I'll never be taken seriously. You know it didn't even

[440] This interview has been originally published by *New England Theatre Journal* in 2017 issue: Najar, Esmaeil. "From Fringe to the West End: Pam Gems, Nancy Meckler, and *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi.*"

occur to me to pursue it. I gradually fell into directing because I was often in a situation where someone knew I had directed a bit in the past and so they would ask me to do a small project. And then I had a lot of success with me directing the Freehold Theatre Company and one day I realized I had left my desire to act behind and I had become director. Once Freehold broke up, work was hard to come by and people would say, "Oh you're gonna have trouble getting work because you're a woman," and I would think "Well, I wonder how true that is? I don't know, do I really want to blame it on that?" So, you could ask "Then why didn't you join the Women's Theatre Group at the time?" But I guess I was more interested in making theatre than being involved in political movements – whatever they were.

EN: Could you have found more support by joining the women's theatre groups?

NM: Maybe. I suppose I was unconsciously a feminist in the sense that I wanted to do something that men do. And I wasn't thinking "Can I be as good at it?" And now, looking back, I think I probably was a role model for a lot of women because now there are so many women directors. While I was directing with Freehold we had had a big success at the Edinburgh Festival with *Antigone*. We were pick of the fringe, and as a result we were chosen by a German theatre to go to Berlin. Soon after, the Arts Council began to fund us to tour the UK. After that we did *The Duchess of Malfi*, once again a piece with a strong female protagonist. At Shared Experience, I was often choosing pieces with strong women's roles and had huge successes at Shared Experience with *Anna Karenina* and *Mill on the Floss*.

EN: You directed the first feminist play in the West End; Gems's first commercial success *Dusa, Fish, Stas, & Vi*.[441] After its production in Edinburgh Festival, it transformed to London and you directed it. How did it come about?

NM: Well, when it was first produced in Edinburgh, at the Edinburgh festival – it interested Michael Rudman who was running the Hampstead Theatre in London. It interested him enough to say, "I would like to do a completely new production of this play," and he knew my work and knew I had successfully directed Pam Gems' *The Project,* so he thought I would be the person to do it. And he produced it at Hampstead Theatre during the Christmas season, which was a very odd time. I remember we only had three weeks rehearsal. To our huge surprise it was a sensation. All the critics really loved it and it went into the West End and to the Mayfair Theatre. I think it played there for about five months and it only closed because one of the actresses was very pregnant by then and we were still trying to hide it. And the producer Michael Codron didn't really want to recast. I remember the actresses saying to me, not long ago, that when they were performing in that play everybody came to see it. It was like any celebrity who came to London had to go and see *Dusa, Fish, Stas, & Vi*. I think it was something to do with the fact that it was an insight into a female world which felt original.

EN: The play was originally titled *Dead Fish*. Do you remember what happened that the title changed to *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi*?

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[441] *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1976) was first presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (at Kundry's Theatre) in August 1976. Caroline Eves directed it at Edinburgh with the original title of *Dead Fish*. In the December of the same year it transferred to the Hampstead Theatre Club with new cast and production team. In February 1977, it moved to the Mayfair Theatre. Nancy Meckler directed its London productions with Alison Fiske in the title role, Fish. It won the Laurence Olivier Award for Actress of the Year in a New Play for Alison Fiske.

NM: Yes. It was called *Dead Fish* when it was at the Edinburgh Festival. Michael Rudman and my husband, David Aukin, who was the general manager of the Hampstead Theatre, felt that it was a shame that it was called *Dead Fish* because it gave away that she would die by the end. The title *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* did work. But it was difficult to explain it to people. You know, people would ask "What is that?" because they wouldn't even realize it was names of women. We used to call it *Tuna Fish on Seeded Rye* [she laughs].

EN: It seems the character of Fish, in this play, is based on Buzz Goodbody, though in activism it also resembles Rosa Luxemburg. Was there any conversation about this in rehearsals or in your dramaturgical research?

NM: Well, Pam was always interested in Rosa Luxemburg and she knew Buzz Goodbody. Buzz Goodbody had made a huge impression because she was a strong young woman who was making her way as a theatre director, which was very unusual. But she had committed suicide, and it was thought that she had committed suicide for personal reasons after the breakup of a relationship. Pam, I think, was inspired by Buzz Goodbody. I don't think she thought she was telling Buzz's story, but I think she was inspired by her to write the play – on some level maybe she was trying to understand the suicide.

EN: Some critics blame Pam Gems for creating 'victim heroines'. In *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* the leading character, Fish, commits suicide despite the fact that she is a strong socialist. What's your comment on this? Do you believe Pam's female characters do not qualify as strong feminists?

NM: Well, she didn't invent those people. She didn't invent Queen Christina or Piaf. She'd already chosen somebody who had a tragic life. So, I don't think she chose them

because they were victims. She chose them because she was fascinated by the ambivalences in their characters. She maybe chose women whose lives were tragic for one reason or another often because they were bold women or they tried to be so many things and their femaleness defeated them. But I think she was attracted to those characters because they were extraordinary women, not because they were victims. I don't think she was attracted to Piaf because her life ended sadly. She was attracted to her because of the extraordinary person and performer she was.

EN: Looking back at the production of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* in 1976, what was the significance of this play for its context and for Women? It seems younger generations have some difficulty in understanding it.

NM: A young director that I know was asked to direct a reading of *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* and she said to me "Oh, I can't get on with this play at all and I don't understand that speech she has about Rosa Luxemburg." And you know this was a woman in her thirties and she didn't get it. And I thought "Oh what a pity" because if I directed the reading, maybe I could make it clear to people how the play works and what its impact was. It was so much of its time that now maybe what it's saying seems a bit cliché. So, maybe you have to wait for a period when people are more interested in looking back and saying "Is that what it was like? Is that what women were thinking and saying then?" Maybe it's too recent so people think "Oh that's a bit old fashioned, isn't it? To see women like that?" or it's a bit schematic to have one anorexic character, one mother nature, one political activist, and one hooker who's also getting a degree in biological sciences. So, some people may think it's a cliché, but at the time I think Pam was basing it on people she did

know. And as I say, it was a real insight into a female world. But if people don't have that context – if they don't know what the context is they can't appreciate it.

EN: Since the 1970s female playwrights collaborated closely with different theatre companies in the Fringe, but not many of them had the opportunity to work with the prominent institutional theatres like the RSC or the National Theatre. You and Pam had this opportunity, you were the first women director to direct for the National Theatre and Pam was the first to have a play produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was her *Queen Christina* (1977). You were asked to direct it but you declined the offer?

NM: I suppose in those days it was fashionable to say, "We've done something by a woman." Pam wrote *Queen Christina* and she wanted me to direct it, and I was asked to direct it, but my problem was that my child was then about eight months old and it would've meant being in Stratford-Upon-Avon for nine weeks with a very small child. And I had another child who was five, and I was a bit anxious about how it was really going to work out because when you're rehearsing at the RSC it means that people are rehearsing with other directors at the same time so that you have to work at odd hours. And I was a bit anxious about the play; I wasn't sure that the play was ready. Also, the main part had already been cast so I didn't have a choice of who was going to play it. And in the end, I just felt I was going to be spending so little time with my newish baby over those nine weeks so I decided not to do it. I'm not sure it was the right decision now. But it was interesting how hard the RSC was trying to find a woman director. You know, they felt they had to have a woman director because the women's movement was a prominent issue of the day.

EN: You were the artistic director of the Shared Experience Theatre Company for twenty-two years. What was your approach towards women in your own company?

NM: I've collaborated a lot with women in my own company. I've worked a lot with woman writers and designers. So, in some ways, perhaps, I might be perceived as a feminist. We did many adaptations of novels. We worked a lot with a writer called Helen Edmundson and then my co-director Polly Teale, she did some adaptations. Famously, she did one of *Jane Eyre* which we brought back two or three times and it went on tour quite a bit abroad. And we did adaptations of *Anna Karenina*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *War and Peace*, a book called *Gone to Earth*; they all have major female figures. And we had a woman writing the adaptations. They almost always had women designers although mostly a male composer that we worked with all the time, Peter Salem. I was interested in Shared Experience in doing work that I considered expressionistic, by which I would mean work that wasn't deeply naturalistic and where you're often finding ways of expressing a character's inner life; expressing their dreams or their fears or their aspirations or their inner thoughts. And whenever we did the adaptations of novels it allowed us to explore that area. And I guess the other plays that we did – Lorca, O'Neil, Shepard, Pinter - they were also writers who I considered to be nonrealistic, expressionistic.

EN: You also directed Gems's *The Project*?

NM: Yes, a few months before we did *Dusa, Fish…*, I directed *The Project* and it was on at the Soho Poly Theatre, which at that time was a very tiny theatre, which had started at the Polytechnic which is why it's called the Soho Poly. And the woman who ran it, Verity Bargate, was very interested in Pam. She wanted me to direct the play. And I

remember when they first came to me about directing it, I was pregnant and I said "Well, you know I can't do it at the moment and then when the baby's born if I'm breastfeeding then I don't want to give up breastfeeding to direct a play." And both Pam and Verity said "No, we'll wait for you." So, I said, "Okay, I'll do it when the baby's five months old." And I did. It was lunchtime theatre. And that was an enormous success. It was only 55 seats, but still, you couldn't get in. It was a natural thing for me to then be asked to do *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi.* And then after that I worked with Pam quite a bit. When my husband, David Aukin, was running the Hampstead Theatre, he commissioned Pam to do a version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, which I directed at Hampstead and we had a fantastic cast. We had Ian Holm who was a big star in those days and Nigel Hawthorne who was also a big television star. That was an enormous success as well. I worked very closely with her on the translation. When David and I moved to Leicester and he was running the Leicester Haymarket one of the first things he did was commission Pam to do a version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and that was also an enormous success, which was thrilling because it's not easy to sell Chekhov in Leicester. In fact, one of the main reviewers from London came up to see it and one of his quotes was "Something wonderful is happening in Leicester." So, everyone was very proud because David was just beginning his regime at the Leicester Haymarket and it was a great start. So yes, I felt very close to Pam because we worked so intensely on those projects. She would often send me scripts and we would talk about them.

EN: For the last question, you have worked with Pam in different productions. What was her process during rehearsals?

NM: She was just incredibly supportive. She would come to rehearsals a lot and make suggestions. If anything wasn't working she would try to think of ways to fix it. She was brilliant at dialogue and so she was a wonderful translator. Pam wasn't a big re-writer, but then the only original plays I did were *Dusa…* and *The Project* and I didn't feel that they needed much in terms of rewriting. And the other two big projects were Chekhov.

EN: Thank you Nancy.

Interview with Sue Dunderdale[442]

Sue Dunderdale directed four of Gems' plays: *Pasionaria* (1985), *Deborah's Daughter* (1994), *Mrs. Pat* (2006), and a revival of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1976). This interview took place at Dunderdale's home in London on 24 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Sue, when did you first meet Pam Gems?

Sue Dunderdale: It was the late '70s, I've been asked to direct a revival of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*. Then I was freelancing in London. They'd **(**Rose Bruford Drama School**)** chosen four of their oddities. There was a young black girl; there was a white girl who was about four feet ten; there was a very ordinary chunky middle-class girl who they didn't know what to do with. I can't remember the fourth, so they chose them. And I contacted Pam to see if she would talk to me. So, we went to her house. She entertained us with tea and biscuits. She was very charming and talked about all the young women. And when we did the production at the Arts Theatre, she came to see it. It was a good production, partly because I responded to the spaces in the text as well as the dialogue, so that she creates these moments where time is passing, which is to do with peoples' mood or what is going on. The previous production I'd seen at Bristol Vic, they'd been ignored

[442]This interview has been originally published by the *Texas Theatre Journal* in 2017 issue: Najar, Esmaeil. '"We Don't Want Clever in Theater, We Want Real Wisdom": Sue Dunderdale, Pam Gems and a Life Full of Memory." This interview took place at Dunderdale's home in London in the Summer of 2017.

and it made it feel like the play happened in a weekend rather than over weeks. Anyway, she liked the production very much, so we became friends. And that's when we started talking about doing other works together.

EN: How did the production of *Pasionaria* come about?

SD: From very early on after we met, she started asking me and I wanted to read her plays. When I read *Pasionaria*, I liked it very much. Then, I got to know Denise Black and Paul Sand and I decided I want to do the play. Pam wanted Denise to play Pasionaria. Denise was mainly a singer then rather than an actor. Very much a performer. I managed to get it on at the Gulbenkian Theatre in Newcastle – John Blackmore was its director. My friend Alex Byrne was the designer. We had a very good cast. Paul was the musical director. And we did it in the January of the miners' strike. It was 1985. I was very proud of the production. It didn't get fantastic reviews, I seem to remember except on Radio Four and the Spanish press. We got a message from Pasionaria [Dolores Ibarruri] herself, which was great. And, it was certainly important to me because it was part of my transition as director into working with script and set and actors in a very much more fluid and very non-naturalistic way. So, it was very important to me. It was a wonderfully political script in the way that the English don't like. Not strident in a nasty way, just strongly pro the struggle of Pasionaria and the working class against the Fascists and against oppression. People always say politics is very complicated. Actually, it is very simple where your affiliations lie. And where you want to empower people or disempower people. And Pam was very good at putting that at the core of what she was saying. It was a piece I was very proud of. I'm sad it's never been done again. Actually, it should be done again.

EN: Then after *Pasionaria*, you directed *Deborah's Daughter* and *Mrs. Pat* respectively?

SD: Yes indeed, *Deborah's Daughter* is a wonderful play. We did it on radio first, by a lovely radio producer Claire Grove who is now dead. Then Chris Honer who was at Manchester Library Theatre heard it on radio and asked if we'd consider doing it there, which we did. Again, apart from Radio Four, the critics were not very generous to it. But I think it is a wonderful play. It's a romantic comedy about ecology. At the same time Pam weaves in ideas about colonialism, about the relationship of the West to the East, into this generic story of a rich westerner, a rich white woman, westerner, in a romance with a Sheik of an oil rich kingdom and what that says about the relationship between the West and the East. It's so clever, so funny. Again, I was proud of the production. And then the next thing I did was *Mrs. Pat* at York. which is a lovely play. We'd done a reading of it and that was just a joy to do really. And the same designer (Norman Coates), who designed *Duse, Fish, Stas, and Vi* for me, did the design at York. Isla Blair played Mrs. Pat very well.

EN: You were also going to direct Pam's *Ludwig* too?

SD: *Winter Love* it's called now. I've directed a reading of it and I'm still trying to get it on. The despair of my life is that there are two wonderful plays, *Winter Love* which is a three hander about being "the other," about platonic love, and about resisting materialism. And *Despatches*, which is, I think, her 21st century version of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, it's about the gap between men and women. And it's also about a maverick interloper who comes from Russia. It's very funny and it's so sharp politically - about gender politics, and national politics as well. And it's taking me forever to get them on. I hope to manage it before I die.

EN: Pam wrote based on historical figures. *Pasionaria*, and *Mrs. Pat* are just two of them that we already talked about, then we have *Piaf*, *Queen Christina*, *Stanley*, *Nelson*, and *Danton Affairs*.

SD: She really took these people and used them to say what she wanted to say about either the political situation that they were in or the struggle that they had to survive. For example, in *Piaf*, she says a lot about female friendship, she says a lot about the male-female relationship, but she also says a lot about the female relationship and friendship. *Queen Christina* is so much about the condition of the intellectual woman. The woman who is not as she is supposed to be. So, she takes something which is perhaps the essence of that person or something which is part of their icon, iconography and then she makes a play about that. They are not biopics, they are not bio plays. No way are they accurate, this and this and this happened, they are about the ideas and the struggles that those people exemplify. Sometimes in a romanticized way, like with *Garibaldi*. And with *Pasionaria* as well, very romanticized. I don't know why she did that, but you are right she loved to do it.

EN: Besides historical figures, Pam showed a huge interest for performers. When we look at her oeuvre, we see plays on/about Marlene Dietrich, Edith Piaf, Greta Garbo, Ethel Merman, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

SD: She had a yearning for beauty, and for beauty that wasn't necessarily the normal kind of beauty. Edith Piaf isn't a normal beauty in one sense but she is an extraordinary figure and it becomes beautiful. And she had an admiration for women who stood out against the norm. Ethel Merman stood out in a way through her goodness, she wasn't the normal kind of Broadway star. They kind of tend to come from poor backgrounds, like herself.

Piaf, Ethel, I think did, Pasionaria did as well. Mrs. Pat had to earn her living and made herself into a star. It was a lower middle-class background and she came from that. She was fascinated by women who became extraordinary. This interest was not just limited to women, *Stanley* is a wonderful play on a man. Of course, he comes from a working-class background too. Class was very, very important to her.

EN: Speaking about productions and rehearsals, what was your experience of working with Pam on this ground?

SD: She would sit and watch, and she'd talk to you. She was complicated. She would always do it through you. I mean, when you asked her to talk to the actors, she would, en group. But you always knew when she started to praise something that it was going to be the opposite that came out. So, I can remember her saying something about the costumes on *Pasionaria* - about how wonderful whatever they were, which was of course leading to the fact that she thought that the way that Denise was being dressed was totally wrong. It's very interesting because she came from working class background and I came from working class background but I came from the north and in the north, you go straight line and she came from the south and you go zigzag. So, I had to learn to translate. She didn't have to learn to translate me because I say what I'm thinking. So. She was fine to work with because she admired me, I admired her very much. But she could be tricky. And I had to learn how to translate what she was saying to me. And then, to decide whether it was good for the production or not.

EN: It seems Pam was picky about designs especially of costumes.

SD: Pam loved style. She is always saying, in her plays about the hat that somebody is wearing or the kind of dress or you have that whole thing with the girls, the women

draping themselves with materials in *Dusa, Fish*, she has always got something that relates to the look of people and their fashion style. And she did have a view of it. She always used to say about poor people, "Poor people all have their own style; they are not just people in rags," and so on.

EN: Looking back to 1970s, multiple women playwrights were introduced to British theater especially through their collaboration with fringe companies. However, none of them received commissions from major subsidized theatres like the RSC and the National Theatre. Pam was leading the field in this respect. She was the first women playwright to be produced by the RSC. How significant do you think this feat was for Pam and of course other women in British theatre?

SD: It's very strange because, you are quite right, she was produced both by RSC and the National, but there always seemed to be a feeling from Pam, and I think it is a correct feeling, that they did her work despite her being her. Howard Davis always used to say he made *Piaf*. Pam had a not very happy relationship with him. He directed *Piaf*, Pam wrote it, he didn't make it. And *Piaf* has stood the test of time and it is a very early piece. Penny Cherns will be able to tell you more about *Queen Christina* and the RSC. And then, of course, there was *Camille* at the RSC. And then *Stanley* with the National. And then many translations. Her translations of Chekhov (and Ibsen) are fantastic, really fantastic. But, for example, when Pam died I wrote to Nicholas Hytner to say that two plays of Pam's still needed to be done and he didn't even ask to read them. Now the National had benefited greatly from *Stanley*, from her *Seagull*, from her *Uncle Vanya*. I can't think of a male playwright of Pam's status if they had died and you wrote to say there are two plays

that have not been done where the artistic director of that institution would have not immediately wanted to read them.

I think she was strange, perhaps it is a British thing, an English thing. She wrote for audiences to enjoy themselves. She is a great writer, but she also writes for audiences to enjoy themselves. And there seems to be a bit of nose up in the air about her as a writer from the institutions because of that. She's so there, she's so funny and they don't honor her. My hope is that eventually, with work like yours she will be honored. Actors do. When actors read her plays they find the texture that is in them and so it's a paradox. It is a paradox that they did do her work because, in the main, they were successful, people came to see them. But they didn't treat her like a Tom Stoppard or a David Hare or whatever with the reverence that she deserves.

EN: A quick survey of British theatre history reveals that Pam did not receive what she deserved in academia and even she was overlooked in contemporary British Theater despite the number of her qualified number of her produced plays. Why so? Why she is not as famous as she should be?

Sue: The English. It's class. It's class. She's not Caryl Churchill. Caryl is very upper class; I think she writes quite pretentiously, sometimes blarney. I don't want to put her down, there are some good plays etc. Pam is kind of her own person. With her own view. She didn't network a lot. And, at the center, apart from *Nelson* and *Garibaldi*, the center of her plays are always women from difficult or working-class backgrounds, or men from equivalent backgrounds. And I think it's her mix of writing, I think, great writing, but for a popular audience that the English theatre establishment and academe don't know what to do with. They don't know what to do with it, and it makes me angry.

EN: Also, I believe part of this goes back to the fact that she did not play the game. She did not promote herself.

SD: She just wanted to write. She like any artist wanted the recognition. We all want recognition because that allows us to do our work. But she wasn't a member of circles that meet up together. She very rarely went to do's. She just wrote. She looked like a fat, plain woman - I don't mean that nastily because I loved the way she looked. And she was treated like a fat, plain nonentity, without a brain. And she had the most incisive brain I have ever come across. She was a real intellect. And that is very rarely recognized in her world. She doesn't yell out "I am clever," clever is low level, you don't want clever in theater you want real wisdom, real intellect and real emotion that comes from the belly. And she had those. And it's very rarely acknowledged. Look at Joan Littlewood. The same qualities. Never really honored in this country. And I think Pam suffered from it.

EN: You established the Women's Playhouse Trust with Pam and some other women in mid 1980s. But it was very short-lived. What was the story of that?

SD: I started it with Pam. We went to look at the Playhouse on Northumberland Avenue. It is a lovely space. And there had been a movement called the Conference of Women Theatre Directors and Administrators, which I'd been involved in the early '80s. And, I think it was just out of frustration that there was so little work by women going on, whether it was directors or writers or actresses. So, I had this idea that we should start a movement to make a theater, a theatre building devoted to women's work. Pam came on board and then I brought other people on board, Sue Parrish, Jane Lapotaire, and so on. And then as those things go, we formed committees and after about I can't remember how many years, I resigned from it because there were so many internal struggles. I just

felt I should leave. And we never achieved it. I still think it would be a fantastic thing to have. A theatre building with funding devoted to the work of women.

EN: And still after more than thirty years there is no exclusive place for women in theatre?

SD: There is nothing. In fact, Women's Theatre Group, which became Sphinx Theatre Company, has lost its Arts Council funding and it is all power to Sue Parrish that she has managed to keep it going without Arts Council funding.

EN: Are there any memories of Pam you want to share with us and is revealing for her character?

SD: I loved the complicatedness of her. She was intellectually the best mind I've probably ever had the privilege to talk with. I loved her deviousness because it was so different from me. And I was very sad to see the mind, I mean, she struggled to keep the mind going even when she was losing her memory. Fought really hard. And because she was devious she would find ways of covering the fact that she couldn't remember things and so on. And I loved to be with her in her garden. She loved gardening. And there was one thing that was very nice about her was that she could override her sense of the unfairness of the way that the theatre world treated her. And yet she still had that consciousness that she wasn't regarded as she knew she was a good writer. I don't mean in like that she was big headed. She knew she was a writer and that she could write and that she had the feel for words and what's underneath words and so on. And she knew that she wasn't regarded as she should be. And there was a mix of not giving a damn about it because she just kept on writing and niggling resentment that she didn't get what she was due from the establishment.

And then when her mind was slipping, the last two or three years, it was very sad to go and visit her but she was sort of quite happy. She used to watch the shopping channels. This wonderful mind that you had talked about so much, watching the shopping channels. She bought jewelry online. So, I've got two or three rings handed to me that she had ordered online. I don't know how much Keith Gems appreciated the fact that she was buying jewelry on line [laughter]. I suppose for me, because I had a difficult relationship with my own mother, she became like my mother - not in a maternal kind of way, because she wasn't maternal. But as a comrade and a colleague. The pleasantest thing was going to visit her in that kitchen, she sat in it with us, and making the cup of tea and the biscuit, and the most fantastic conversations could issue about everything. Sometimes I didn't agree with what she had to say but there was always a putting of the human before everything else, people came first in the way she talked about politics, and about people, and about life.

Interview with Denise Black

Denise Black, an actress, received her first theatre role in Gems' *Pasionaria,* playing the title role. Later on, she also performed the title role in Gems' adaptation of Lorca's *Yerma*. This interview took place at Keith Gems' home in London on 12 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Denise, when did you meet Pam for the first time?

Denise Black: I met Pam for the first time in Spain. I'd met a writer called Paul Sand, and he said come over to – I've got a friend in Spain. I was terrified, I was going to meet a playwright and Keith as well. Keith greeted us. They had an annex. He said "Look, the fridge is full, anything you'd like." I'd never met anyone like this. I spoke to Pam briefly among all her books and we spoke briefly and then it was clear that no more small talk was needed and that was very much the ethos that you are who you are with Pam and I've never been a household like it. Every tenth word was so long I couldn't understand it and I adored her.

EN: Then you've been cast in *Pasionaria*. How did it come about? Pam in an interview mentioned that she struggled with Sue Dunderdale to have you in this production.

DB: Pam was fierce. You must understand Pam was fierce and she had it in her brain that I should play Pasionaria, which for me, I was nobody and it was just extraordinary that anybody should believe in me that much. And she even rewrote it because I was very young at the time. I think I was only about 26 and I took the Pasionaria up to 40; but

beyond that wouldn't have been credible. She was determined and she would fight for what she wanted. So, I went over to this place in Spain of hers and then I had a "get by in Spanish" book and I took a train up to Oviedo and went all along the mining coast in search of La Pasionaria. In Ischia, I met somebody and I said I wanted to find out more about the late Dolores Ibárruri, because Pam had told me she was dead. And he said, "What do you mean the 'late' Dolores Ibárruri? She is a friend of mine and she lives in Madrid." Oh my God! And he said, "Would you like to meet her?" and I said, "Yes." And I went and hung out in Madrid for several days. In fact, she was not particularly well. And I waited about four days and then I got cold feet and I thought, "no, no, I'll work from the video." Because, if you meet the real person, that's a huge responsibility. So, I worked from the footage that there was of the extraordinary and exquisite woman that was Dolores Ibárruri, and then she sent us a video as we opened in New Castle. She became the leader of the Communist party after a very, very poor start as a miner's daughter and she sent her video of solidarity with the miners in England. They were on strike at that time, and the whole cast felt blessed.

EN: if I am not mistaken *Pasionaria* was your theatre debut? What were some of the challenges and what was Pam's role in your professional journey?

DB: So, I was very scared playing La Pasionaria because I was untrained. I didn't have any set ways of approaching work and obviously as the leader there were speeches and Delores was extraordinary at rhetoric. Fortunately, there's footage, so I was able to sort of get a sense of her physicality and everything but I had no way of learning the lines. Pages and pages and pages! And so, I would sit kind of crying in my bed-sit and until I got the best of it and the director Sue Dunderdale really looked after me. But as we got

further into the rehearsal process, I went to see Pam who was in a hotel at that point she'd come to visit the rehearsal and I went to see her in her room, which was kind of chaos and sort of bags and papers. She would read papers and always wrote to the papers and she gave me a whole load of advice and it was very pithy, not intellectual in any way. It was little keys as to how to really inhabit it, which was I think every actor's very grateful to have contact to the writer, because the director is your main handle into the job, but to have contact to the writer you feel like you're talking to the horse's mouth and it give you courage.

EN: Did you work on any other project with Pam?

DB: I did a second Pam play, her version of *Yerma*. This was much later in my career, and I'd done a few things at the Royal Exchange in Manchester and they said, "If there is anything you are interested to do, tell us about it." And I'd worked up there with a director called Helena Kaut-Howson, who is an extraordinary brilliant director. And so, she and I worked on *Yerma*. It was obviously *Yerma* by Lorca and, in fact, there is lot of tensions between Helena and Pam's version. She did another version afterwards using some of the mise en scène, the set pieces. She was quite at odds with what Pam had done. Lorca had written a lot of poetry. Pam had a way, she would do a word by-word translation so she had exactly what Lorca had written and then she would study and she would study and she would study and then, this is what she told me, she would put it in the drawer and she would stop and then she wrote from the heart. And there were long tracts of poetry in Lorca's version, Lorca's original. And in Pam's version – Yerma would say, "OK." (Laughter). In a place then. And Helena would say, "Darling, darling, there are pages and pages, you can't say this." And I spoke to Pam about it and she said,

"I have to believe if I'm working on a great script like a Chekhov or a Lorca that he is on my shoulder and if he were in the room with me now and he knew the audience as they were now, he would approve of the decisions that I am making because times have changed. And that proved to be true. *Yerma* was perhaps the greatest for my experience of my entire acting career. And for a long time afterwards I could sit on my bed afterwards and I would be on the set but the set wouldn't be a theatre set but it would be where Yerma lived and I could relive Yerma and that was an extraordinary gift for Pam to give me.

EN: As a survey of history and critical books on women's theatre show Pam has received little attention in academia and even as Sue Dunderdale and Jonathan Gems mention she was overlooked in contemporary British theatre despite her prolific number of qualified produced plays. How so, why is she not as famous as she should be?

DB: Pam's not as famous as she should be because she is quite reclusive and she didn't play the game very well; she was also a woman. Although she was university trained, not part of the gang. And she had a sixth sense for saying the wrong thing in public. She was who she was and then so Pam was picked up very early. Her Mom was in service in the West, in New Forest. and she had a thick Burr of an accent, the original Pam, I've met her family, but she reinvented herself as this erudite, learned person 'cause she was picked up by school teacher who went back to her Mum and said "your daughter is extraordinarily bright." So, Pam was a contradiction as an adult because she was this peasant woman and at heart with a foul mouth on her and a really irreverent sense of humor and a rebel but she was also a huge mind and an academic. I sat with her on a sofa very like this sofa with these cushions which Pam made and it was later in life, and she

said that she was under done and why couldn't she get her work on like other people and I said "Darling, the great thing is because you've been not spoon fed, because it is difficult, you're still angry, still have a lot to say." And that's the most precious thing for a playwright in her later years she still had a lot to stay so I suppose she is still a diamond yet to be discovered.

EN: In an interview, you mentioned that you and Pam would speak about politics. What was her political view and did it change over times?

DB: I suppose Pam was a radical and a feminist. But she didn't sit nicely in the feminist slot. Everybody though Pam was younger than she was. Everyone thought she was the same age as Caryl Churchill and there were so few photographs of Pam that went on. But in fact, Pam started to write later in life. Pam's view of politics was based very much on her heart understanding of the world which she saw because she had had four children before she started to write. But it was only later in life that she really dedicated herself after the children to "I will write, I will write above everything else." And I think that affected her politics so she was left wing without a doubt – but it did change because she didn't belong to any party. She was a thinker and so under certain circumstances you can't just follow one party, you have to be at odds with your party. She also above everything. I think it was she thought that women were not represented as she as they should be and so she wrote huge parts for women. She was criticized for doing "biopics" and the irony is that she did *Piaf* as a pot boiler. Because if you do a play about somebody famous it has a better shout of going on. Pam's heart land was in the lesser known plays that come from the heart and form her experience. I don't want to give you the impression that Pam and I talked politics all the time. We gossiped a great deal. We

gossiped and we laughed and we told filthy jokes. All of which she enjoyed. I remember her telling me once though; she was very serious about her writing, and she savored every line in her mouth. She said it. And she said she also saw the sentences, she kind of felt them, and it was her great joy to hone them so that they were sayable and said perfectly what she wanted to express and I think you feel that in the line.

EN: As you mentioned, Pam liked to write roles for women as she felt they are hugely underrepresented in theatre. Her plays in 70's and 80's mostly have female protagonists. What happened that Pam in the '90s and afterwards pays equal attention to men and women. At this period, she has male protagonists as well among them *Stanley* and *Garibaldi*. Was there any change of view in her towards feminism? Do you see any change in her feminism from her early years to her later years when she writes these plays?

DB: I think that Pam was a bundle of contradictions, as any great mind should be - because nobody knows all the answers. And it is very hard to get on in this world without a niche. So, if you'd like, feminism was the nearest to her niche, but even out of vanity she'd kick against it because she wanted to rethink everything. I mean she was terribly in love with Stanley and Garibaldi as well, so they didn't have to be women. I did see a shift, yes, I did. I think as you get older; I'm thinking this as I get towards, God help me, 60. I'm 57 now and you get freer with your thought, you get less fetid by political conventions of what you should and what you shouldn't. And if you are in touch with your heart, and Pam was very, very in touch, over and above with her heart so her feelings come from there so it's not her intellect although she's got a massive brain and although she's got a psychology degree. I've got a job on a show called "Queer as Folk,"

which is written by a brilliant writer called Russell G. Davis, and I've since worked with him again on a grand writing series called "Cucumber." And I told Pam about it and she said, "Oh! Bloody Hell darling, another club that I can't be a member of." So, I think she really kind of, you know, it troubled her that –she really didn't belong in feminism she didn't really belong in left wing she didn't really belong anywhere because she was a party of one.

EN: Some feminist scholars criticized Pam for making victim-heroines. For example, we see that Fish commits suicide or Piaf is a tough character who is indeed broken and is not an ideal hero. What's your comment on this?

DB: Pam couldn't bear sentimental, Pam couldn't bear sentiment. I know that she liked Piaf because of that fire she loved, she loved fire in people that made them do things. Garibaldi had that as much as Piaf. Do You see what I mean? So, she wasn't making a political point she wasn't making a beef she was connecting with what fired her and then writing from there.

EN: Another point we see Pam's plays is children. It seems that she likes women to have children. What was her view of women and children and marriage overall?

DB: I'll tell you two stories, two moments. So, one, I was talking to Pam and she said, "Oh, Darling, you're not waiting for the right time—to start a family." And I said, "Well, you know, I mean, just some kind of stability. I've got no money and I'm in rented accommodation." And she said, "Sweetheart, it's always going to bloody, and you're going to have to busk it for the rest of your life, so don't wait." And that was really good advice. She also, by the way told me that having child was like having the biggest shit of your life, which is also very good advice. And another time she said to me, "I'm not

saying you've got to have children. I'm just saying that if you have children it makes you less selfish because it is no longer about you so you grow up." Another interesting thing she said to me is "It's very hard for men, Darling" she said. "Because, with a woman you hit puberty and all the bits sprout and that's the same as for the men but you have periods these changes you have pregnancies you swell up and you know that something change has happened in your life because it is in your physical being but a man doesn't have that. So, it's harder for him to come to terms with change. Kind of that paraphrasing you that, Pam, sorry.

EN: As Pam's friend, why do you think she didn't promote herself? Usually, when you chose playwriting as a career, you must be ready to stand up for it and promote your work.

DB: Pam was just a bundle of contradictions. I took a very bright young director who wanted to work with her, Hannah Chissick to see her – in her later life and she said that that Pam created a kind of Bohemia at her home in which everybody was welcome nobody was an outcast and all you had to do was be true to yourself, which is terribly confusing because everywhere is full of invisible rules, social rules. Pam didn't – survive in an environment where you had to pretend and so I suppose as she got older she became more reclusive. She was very powerful in a room, but I don't think she knew that. She was incredibly inspirational to all of us, but, probably very insecure. So, she created this environment and you will see that theme in her plays as well, a sanctuary if you like where everybody's welcome. And I think that is what she wanted to create and that is where she wanted to live.

EN: Thank you, Denise!

Interview with Penny Cherns[443]

Penny Cherns is a theater and television director and currently is the head of the MA classical acting for the professional theatre at LAMDA. She directed Gems' *Queen Christina* and a revival of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*. This interview took place in LAMDA, London on 26 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Penny, do you remember when and where you met Pam for the first time?

Penny Cherns: Yes, it was the mid 70s, something like '75, '76. I first met her at a Women in Entertainment Conference and at that time I was working all the time in rep. I was one of the few women directors around at the time who actually was having a career that was in mainstream theatre as opposed to having to fight my way in from the fringe, which was incredibly lucky and rather marvelous. And, so at these conferences I was actually quite useful for the time; I was somewhere where people could use me as a good contact; and that's when I first began talking to Pam. I seem to remember and I don't think I'm inventing this, that we talked about possibly doing projects together. But this was all in those generally heady days when we were all trying to work together and think of things that we could do as women together to change what was going on in theatre at the time.

[443] A short version of this interview is forthcoming in *Contemporary Theatre Review* in 2018.

EN: If I am not mistaken your first major collaboration with Pam occurred during *Queen Christina* in 1977. What happened that you have been chosen to direct it?

PC: The play was chosen by Ron Daniels to be on at The Other Place. Ron was a director at the Royal Shakespeare Company and was the artistic director of The Other Place. At that time, this particular venue was putting on modern plays. When *Queen Christina* came about, Pam insisted or suggested or demanded [laughter] - I don't know what she did but one of them - that there should be a woman director. And then I think it was between a couple of us, and we had interviews with Ron Daniels and then I was offered the production.

EN: Now that we look back in history, we see that this play is a landmark for women's theatre as it was the first play written by a woman, directed by a woman and starring a woman, produced at the male-dominated RSC. What was the importance of this play for its original time of production?

PC: I think doing this play at the RSC was very important for women especially for women playwrights, not in the sense that it necessarily brought forth a whole slew of women's writing, but at least broke the virginity of it if you like. I mean the RSC already had some female directors; the most important they had was a woman running The Other Place, Buzz Goodbody. So, she had been terribly important in opening up the idea of women directors at that theatre. But unfortunately, she had committed suicide - actually at the same age as I was when I went in to direct *Queen Christina*. It was rather a chilling thought. But Buzz made a lot of breakthroughs, and so it wasn't as if I was just sort of running into a virgin territory in that sense. It was the first play that had a woman as a leading character, so that is true.

EN: Were they ready to accept you as pioneer women leading a theatre production in this major theatre company? How was it like working in a male environment?

PC: Well, it's quite a difficult question to answer because it's not just about the male environment. I mean I'd been working in environments which were run by male artistic directors for a while because I was assistant and then associate director to a number of theatres before this, and in those situations most of the technical crew had been male and a lot of the stage management had been female, the artistic directors had been male and they were wonderful. They were sort of highly facilitating and extraordinarily interesting men, including Geoffrey Reeves, Stephen Hollis, and Chris Honer, who had given me my head in a way; they'd given me a lot of chances in a lot of productions. So, I didn't have the problem in that sense. There was always the problem of working with technical crews anyway. I was always aware that I didn't want to be seen as 'strident' and I didn't want to be called 'aggressive' but I needed to be firm and decisive and I needed to know my stuff. And that, I think, carried through also into the RSC. The RSC was a different scenario: it was run by men, but more significantly it was pretty vast and pretty disparate. And it was also coming towards the end of the period with Trevor Nunn and Terry Hands working together and they weren't entirely harmonious at the time. I mean, the place wasn't harmonious. And the companies were all coming to the end of the very tiring season. So that factored in actually more than the maleness of it. I'm always a bit dubious about just talking about the maleness of it if you see what I mean, without deconstructing what that meant for the structural implications.

One area to do with men that was difficult was casting; I was 'unknown and therefore not an 'exciting' prospect necessarily, and in no way was I presented as or considered to be

'pioneering'. The male actors, in my memory, were not particularly interested in playing the second parts. They weren't used to that and that was very difficult and I think we had quite a difficult time casting it. It was being cast from inside the company as per usual with Ron and with Trevor's help, and myself sort of selecting and seeing people and knowing of people, and it was very hard to find the supporting cast. Also, it was difficult with the women because looking back, all the younger women in the company could have seen this as an opportunity to be playing a leading role – and we made the decision to cast Sheila Allen who had fought for the play to be put on; she had contacts with the artistic directorate and had brought the play to their attention. So, it was quite a fractious time generally. Working with Ron, was fine except he wasn't there most of the time. Apart from Trevor Nunn nobody else was around so I was a bit marooned by the 'male' directorate; I was perfectly happy working in environments where I was working with male actors of my own age or older and with male technical crews. So that aspect of 'male domination' wasn't a problem. Moreover, I have to say I was supported by two fantastic, supportive, and central women in the RSC at that time: Cicely Berry and Gillian Lynne.

EN: From one of our mutual friends I've heard that you didn't have a very nice time with one the contentious actors during rehearsals for this show. Do you want to share with us the story of it?

PC: Yes indeed, I did not have a very interesting time with him because he was quite antagonistic. Even though I didn't have problems with the male environment and men per se, I think there was very much a sense of Who is she? Where is she coming from? Why is she coming in to work at the RSC? What's her trajectory? She's not a star director –

which would have been difficult to find anyway because there weren't many of us who at that time who would have been 'star' directors. Jane Howell and Caroline Eves were two of them who were leading the field, and Clare Venables at the time were the three people who were running companies, rep companies. But aside from that, most of my generation who were finding work as directors were all up and coming, so there was a certain fractiousness about that, and there was also the dislike of the fact that it starred a woman; the fact that she was in just about every scene and the men were part of an ensemble. And one of the actors appeared to lead the faction that was antagonistic to the play, its contents, having this unknown woman director. I'd just found it quite funny that I was being accused of being ferociously organized and letting people know when they were going to be called and so on. And I have no real memory of whether I overdid it or not. I didn't think I was. He also seemed to have a difficult relationship with Sheila Allen who was playing the lead. So, I think there were a number of issues.

EN: How was Pam during rehearsals? How did she deal with such issues?

PC: Oh, she was fabulous. She was incredibly supportive. She and the designer, Di Seymour, who is a brilliant designer, and myself were actually sharing an apartment on the waterside actually next door to 'the difficult actor' [she laughs]. Lovely little house with a fabulous view of the Avon and the three of us were there sometimes feeling a bit like we were in a bunker with all of us shoring each other up because it was not an easy time. I had my own nerves at the time and it was my first time at the RSC, and it was a difficult play and all the rest of it. And Pam was incredibly supportive through all of that, and so were Di, Cicely, and Gillian. So, we all felt that we were together at the time; that was the thing that was so lovely, harmonious, supportive, and creative. And a lovely sort

of bit of harmony in the middle of all this mayhem. I think in retrospect nobody meant to be undermining; it was reactive; it was unpleasant and a bit frightening but then again nobody was making patronizing 'allowances' either.

EN: Indeed your experience at the time somewhat resembled Queen Christina's difficult situation at court of Sweden in the 17th century. What was your own take on actual historical Christina? You presented her as a cross-dresser all throughout the play, am I right?

PC: Well, Queen Christina was the daughter of Gustavus Adolphus the King of Sweden. Whether she was a cross dresser per se, I'm not quite sure what cross-dresser means in this context, but she was brought up by her father to be a boy. But the way we would look at it today, to be as good as a boy, you know, if she was going to be the Queen. She had to be able to be in charge of all her country - her ministers and her armies and her church – of all these men and yet still remain a woman. I think historically that's why her father brought her up like that, not that he wanted her to be a boy. So, she would switch between the two qualities; but I think it was more like Queen Elizabeth saying I have the stomach of a King. She was being a King-Queen to her country, and like Elizabeth she was not a great beauty. She was described historically as being fiercely intelligent, and having wonderful lively eyes, and things like that but she obviously was not, in any way, 'an oil painting'. She was not somebody who people would just fall for because of her looks. So, what Pam was doing was exploring this whole area (like Schiller with Mary Stuart). She was interested in exploring this whole area of somebody who is operating at the height of their game having to be the top person and having to maintain being a woman while actually having to behave in so many ways in a 'masculine' way as she was

occupying hitherto mainly male roles. I mean there weren't huge examples of queens. Queen Elizabeth for instance immediately preceded Queen Christina and so there were French and English role models. And indeed, models of strong Italian women in power. But she was in new territory and she was fighting a war because her father had been fighting a war. And this war was one of the key wars that was to shape Europe – the Thirty Years War.

EN: How the play and production were received by the audience and critics?

PC: The audience seemed to enjoy it very much including members of the company who came to see it. Some members of the artistic directorship at the time and people like David Jones, Sheila's husband, were incredibly complimentary; even Trevor when he first saw it. So, it seemed to go down well because there was quite a lot of derring-do in it; there were fights and there was love, there was passion, there was distress, and there were fabulous scenes, like the one between Queen Christina and Descartes when she says a line that has stuck with me to this day, "I do not know how to go forward to the next step in my life." I remember when I first read it just made me say "Oh, God, this resonates so strongly" and because there was such a strong emotional core to it, it was the story being told as a woman experiencing a journey through life, and an emotional journey. It was not dotting I's and crossing T's. So, I think it was received as a thoroughly good story, a cracking good story. However, it wasn't critically well received overall, which is a slightly different ballpark. I mean it was a mixed bag, but audience-wise it seemed to be well received I think.

EN: Why do you think *Queen Christina* has not received a major revival almost thirty years after its first production?

PC: It's interesting, isn't it? Maybe it's because it didn't get a hugely positive critical reception and was not included in the London transfer. It's also quite a large cast/epic kind of play and I think it's one of those that sort of hits a moment and then things move on. And it is probably one of those plays that in about five years' time somebody will do again in another version or turn into an opera or something like that because it has a huge operatic conceit at its center. And that's fallen slightly out of fashion, I just think though, I really do think it is a question of fashion apart from anything else. The writing in England has moved away from that sort of looking at a single figure in that world. I think we've changed. It probably needs an actor to seize it and go, "you know what, I would really like to do this." I mean, all Pam's plays demand quite large casts apart from *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* to work because you've got to get a sense of this woman in a sea. And if you don't get the sea, then I think it kind of falls apart; it needs the full panoply. At the RSC, we could have many more people on the stage and I think that helped. So, I think it is expensive. But I suspect also that if you look at any play where an actress has wanted to do it, it has probably always got a jolly good male role going alongside it, and there isn't quite in this. It would absolutely be a star vehicle and that's quite difficult. I suppose any star vehicles we've had of that kind recently; even Helen Mirren being the Queen, you've only got two or three prime ministers knocking around. So again, you're not asking a huge cast of very strong men to support a main female character. And I suspect that is also part of it. I think we still have that lurking problem.

EN: I believe after *Queen Christina* you have directed the revival of Pam's *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* in the late '70s. How did that come about?

PC: Indeed, Pam suggested me for the second production of *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*. Nancy Meckler had directed the first one in London. Some years later, when they wanted to do it at Bristol Vic Pam suggested me to Richard Cottrell because I'd done *Queen Christina*, so that's how I came into the frame. We weren't working alongside each other at that point, however, because the play had been done, so she didn't have to kind of be round it, cooking it and altering it as she went. Although it was a shame not to work with Pam, it was a delightful experience. I mean one that was absolutely fabulous. It was an enjoyable production, Richard Cottrell was wonderful, the Bristol Vic, were very supportive there was none of the edginess of working in Stratford; the repertory theatre movement was in a different place I think to the RSC.

EN: Some feminist critics criticize Pam for her approach towards feminism. They believe her protagonists are not ideally representing feminist causes. For example, Queen Christina, instead of ruling her country with her intellectual power, abdicates and explores her feminine self that finally leads her yearn for motherhood, or Fish in the *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* is a socialist activist who fails in her personal relationship and consequently commits suicide. As someone who have experienced the women's liberation movement and the development of second wave of feminism, what's your comment on this aspect of Pam's drama?

PC: The debate goes on. How do you write for a theatre which is looking at the position of women if you don't adequately reflect the fact that most of the time they are operating in a world which has become dominated by men, not because men are beastly and awful but because this is the pattern this is the way that society has evolved and we are constantly evolving. But if you are then confronting this in some way you are looking at

that dynamic. Now, the way we are trying to solve it now, which is very interesting, is by doing all female plays or by doing all female Shakespeare for instance, and actually not worrying about age and not worrying about looks and you know actually trying to challenge all the perceptions as a way of at least doing some plays that are already written. And people are looking at ways of writing plays for women and finding it very hard because what do you do? So, we end up with plays where women get terribly drunk and go on to talk about their men; men are still the center of their lives. One of the things that I found fabulous about *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* was that it was for women in various states of stress about their relationships but also trying to forge their way ahead. In her plays, Pam was trying to look at all the given circumstances of this world and the capacities of these women how do they actually navigate that situation socially, emotionally, sexually, and politically. And they make mistakes, and they crash out, and they crash and burn, and then they get up again. And to my mind that was a brilliant way especially exploring it through the historic, taking these historical women who were by default in a very, very masculine environment and actually in a position of war or in a world where the world of intellect was taken up by men mainly. She looked at the contradictions posed by these circumstances and explored the confusions of someone navigating them for the first time. She was saying here is somebody who is really trying to succeed on all these levels and in fact succeeding and then actually having to be seen as either/or. So how do you create a world in which this is not the problem? I thought that *Queen Christina* navigated this very interestingly. That's the other thing, it was a true story. It is not as if she distorted Queen Christina's history either. The weird thing about Queen Christina herself in history, which Pam also looked at in the play, is that she ended

coming up from this northern, Lutheran territory, rigorous and masculine; brought up by a father who trained her to be able to compete; but she ended up in Rome amid heat, warmth, sensuality, and color. This is what we tried to get in the production. And this becomes the metaphor for the either/or: do we choose the senses or the brain. And she was longing for both and in the end found a sort of semi-marriage by bringing intellectuals into Sweden and hence meeting with Descartes, and meeting the cardinals in Rome, and befriending a cardinal and becoming very, very close to him. The thing is it is also easy to criticize, but as a result of Pam doing that, as a result of Pam foregrounding these kinds of choices we are able to move on and write other plays, and do other plays like the female *Richard II* and the female *Hamlet*, and so on. I mean, I know Sarah Bernhardt did that so there is a tradition but Pam was a pioneer who enabled us to extend that tradition to challenge the world of the play. I think that Pam was a vital and key part of that journey and should be congratulated for that. Rather like Angela Carter, you know, just actually breaking the mould of the fairy tale for instance and having the woman in Blue Beard saved by her mother. It's that sort of shock. You are forced to upend the way you've looked at the world. You've looked at this prostitute who is with all these men and it's sad and romantic but we know the French Sparrow [Edith Piaf], but what was her fight. Or this Queen, but how did she manage with all that isolation? I think it started getting people to look at the world through a different prism, which I think is really important, and is ignored if she is just criticized for writing plays which put women in a man's world.

EN: A survey of history of British theatre shows that Pam received a little attention in Academia. Also, many believe that she was overlooked in contemporary British Theatre. What do you think could be the reason for this?

PC: Well I think there's a number of people overlooked. I think that Gems's son, Jonathan, is overlooked himself. I think Doug Lucie is overlooked. I mean there are people who hit a spot at a certain time and then become unfashionable. I think there are several factors; some of which I've already mentioned. Also, it's part of the whole thrust for the new and so on. She didn't really break dramatic forms but I think she broached new content. I think Pam did some extraordinarily important work. I've always felt that *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* is a tremendously exciting play, and uncomfortable. It really had four women in it and was the most exciting for women working with women; a lot of the other plays, which are thrilling and interesting, were looking at a woman in a man's world and so always had to grapple with the fact that there were a lot of men in the cast. Pam at least got to the West End and things like that and there was acknowledgement. I remember quite a lot of excitement when *Piaf* and *Camille* were produced. I mean partly because she very cleverly picked people that the audiences could come to with a certain amount of foreknowledge and then she could upend it, and I thought that was terrific and very clever. And I think that cleverness will come up again, people like you will re-examine it. But she was not celebrated like she should have been. She didn't seek the limelight. We now have possibly even more with Twitter following that if you look great and you are young and energetic and prepared to be pushy and can pitch yourself, you actually float to the top for a brief moment, and Pam was none of those things. She was somebody who was concerned with what she was writing about. She was older. It wasn't

about her, it was about what she was doing. She cared about bringing other people along. And that was profoundly unfashionable in the '80s. It was more fashionable in the '70s, and lost its traction in the '80s and definitely was not part of the world in the '90s. So, there are a number of factors – I mean there were other women writers who were coming along as well, but in a way Pam was leading the field. And I think it's always true that people who lead the field tend to be the ones who get left behind as the new discoveries take over. She pushed herself forward, but she wasn't pushy. I suspect her time will come again. Rather like other great artists. I think she made important contributions and she definitely shook the field up in more ways than one.

EN: For final question, do you have any memory of Pam that might be revealing her character more and that you want to share with us?

PC: Well there are hundreds of them. I suppose one of the funniest memories I have is of a meeting which was not held under funny circumstances. I mean, unfortunately, this was another great misfortune actually in the production of *Queen Christina*. There was one actor in it playing Queen Christina's advisor, prime minister, called Clem McCallin, who was a wonderful man and a very, very good actor. And he was one of the 'fathers' of the RSC at the time. And he was delighted to be a part of the process and helped to hold the factions together like glue - in a very gentle way. He was extremely responsive to anything that I was trying out which must not have been what everybody was used to. But also, critical in the right way. So, he was a wonderful actor to work with. But unfortunately, unfortunate on a lot of levels, he died; he had leukemia and it returned at this point and he died in the middle of rehearsals. Well, this was a huge tragedy, a huge loss anyway, of losing him to the theatre, losing him to the company, and all of us. His

death actually helped fracture everything again. Not just because he wasn't there as a glue, but it was a shock to everybody. As a result of him, of his dying, we then had to recast in the middle of the rehearsals. And there was a meeting – with everybody – who was concerned with the play, what we should do and who should we cast. And Pam dressed in her wonderful caftan and head scarves [laughter] shuffled in and everybody was looking to see who she was, and she said, "I think they think I'm the cleaner." And it was just so classic because she didn't care at one level, but it made a point and the fact, again, that there she was, she was the first woman at the theatre writing a play which was the first play, as you said, written by a woman, directed by a woman, starring a woman that the RSC had done and hardly anybody knew who she was, and didn't actually put themselves out to find out who she was either prior to that meeting. And so, although that's sort of treasured memory of Pam, it's one that absolutely sticks in my memory as being almost symbolic of the experience. Which, as you can probably tell, it is sort of a mixed bag. It was both exhilarating and devastating in lots of different ways; and fractious and difficult. What's so funny of course is that subsequently people come up, you know, you meet them twenty years later and they are warm and friendly and remember the whole thing with great affection. So that's why I say, it's to do with the timing. But, anyway, I hope that contributes to a memorial of this person: the ever-supportive, rather maternal Pam, always laughing, I mean she was always ready to smooth things over and smile; there was never distress. I might have been head banging, Di might have been head banging. Sheila having a nervous breakdown in the corner, you know, but Pam was there calming it all. And that particular characteristic sticks out and is the image I treasure.

EN: Thank you, Penny!

Interview with David Gems

David Gems is Pam Gems' youngest son. This interview took place at his office in London on 19 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: David, somewhere Pam mentioned that she had derived the inspiration for her first commercial success, *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, from people of one of your houses. It seems there was a six-piece band in the basement of a house. The people in and around this house made the first foundations of her characters in this play. Is it right?

David Gems: Yes, that was Phillimore Place. So, they lived in Eaton Terrace for a while. They liked to move a lot so they moved from Eaton Terrace to Phillimore place which is near Holland Park. It's a big Victorian house. Its basement was where my brother and sister lived, in that sort of separate bit and there were a lot of other people living down there. And they built a sound studio in the basement. And the band that practiced down there was mainly my brother-in-law's band, Paul Sanders now Paul Sand, Denise Black's husband. He was married previously to my sister Sarah. And they used to rent it out. I remember the Spiders playing there, which was David Bowie's band. After the band they split up, that band split up. But there was a woman who rented one of the rooms in the basement who was a call girl, who was saving money to take a degree in marine biology. And she was she was a professional shoplifter. She did very top end shop lifting. So that is someone who you may recognize her character in *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*. That was

very much a character from that. Pam tended to draw a lot from people around her for her plays. So that's where Dusa came from. The name Dusa was actually a woman who lived in the top floor of Phillimore Place. An American woman who lived up there. So, Pam sort of mixed the two characters together.

EN: Do you think Pam's feminism changed over years?

DG: I think her views changed a lot over time. It is very hard to generalize about her. How Pam was in the 1960s, how she was in the '70s, how she was in the '80s... in some ways like three different people. I think what, what she tended to do was that she often tried on sort of ideas and fashions, especially in the -60s and -70s when she was I think a bit less confident in a way. She seemed more kind of inclined to take on the fashions that were around and kind of flow with the movements and fashions of thought. But as she got older I think she became much more her. She became much more independent in a way. So, depending on when you look at her work, sometimes it seems to reflect a lot of things that are going on at the time.

EN: Pam started her professional career late in her forties. So, isn't it a bit strange that she followed fashions at that age?

DG: Yes. I mean, I'm trying to answer this question. It is difficult because there are a lot of different parts of the question and some of them I think are sort of unanswerable really. Because I can't really say that she had one view. I mean she was strongly of the view that it's not a matter of simply women being men. She often identified herself as "not a feminist" and so on. But yet it seems to me that plainly she was. [He laughs.] Perhaps it is because there is the question of what, it means to be a feminist. To my mind, bottom line is being a feminist means being part of an interest group. Saying, "Well, we

are women and we have these things that have being done to us. So, we will get together and we will try and prevent it." So, right? So, you say, "Women aren't getting equal pay to men, so let's get together as women and try to have a campaign to try to get equal pay." There is nothing about identity in there or anything or anything about what, what it means to be a woman or anything it is simply a matter of women getting together to fight for their rights and fight for being treated decently. But, for example, Pam was conscious of the fact that there were relatively few good parts for women. She was very conscious of writing good roles for women, and including for older women. Not just parts for beautiful, young, juvenile leads but for good parts for older women are relatively few, so in that sense you know you can say that she is writing for women. So, in that sense she is a feminist. Sometimes the ideas of what feminism is seem to me to get a little bit tangled up. And then people say, "Oh, I'm not that." But I think fundamentally she was.

EN: Pam grew up in a working-class family and even was forced to leave study to work in various jobs. What does 'class' identify in Pam's life? Do you think her social background reflects in her plays?

DG: She was barely even working class. When she got a scholarship – which enabled her to go to a, a good grammar school, Brockenhurst Grammar School, she would have done elocution lessons to change her speech, so her accent was Received Pronunciation accent. Although she could switch into her, occasionally she would just for demonstration [laughs]. She would switch into her original voice, which was a broad Hampshire accent. And then she sort of erased her working class identity. I guess she wanted to escape, you know, she wanted to escape into the world that she knew, especially through books. She had no location really in terms of class. She married into the sort of upper middle class,

really. And in fact, when I was born, she didn't give me the family name. My name on my birth certificate was Holland Gems, she gave me a double-barreled name. And in fact, she used to style herself Mrs. Holland Gems. I remember her calling up Harrods and putting it on the account, "put it on the account of Mrs. Holland Gems." So, she was really styling herself as an upper-class woman. And then 1968 happened and of course she could draw on her working-class roots again. And she didn't write a great deal about working people but some of the stuff she did write. Like, I'm thinking about some of the short early plays that were really, really great. So, I think she drew on it, but I don't think she certainly not, she has no real class. She does not really belong to any particular class. She created herself. And I think she kept on creating herself over and over. That is why she is rather quite a difficult person to know. But it's not that unusual. It's not that unusual. You find the people who have kind of changed their identity through growth, through development. And I think some of her family felt that she turned her back on them. I think her mother did. Pam felt that she sort of was too good for them, and was embarrassed by them. But I think they simply didn't get on. She became very different. But when she was older she became much more sort of loyal to her origins and they even moved back to Christ Church and she kind of reconnected with some far relatives.

EN: Many of Pam's plays have songs and music in them. It seems with *Piaf* she is interested both in her character and in her performance. Can you comment on this interest of hers?

DG: Yeah, Well, Pam spent at least 15 years continually writing pretty much without any success at all. In the '70s when she moved to London, she wanted to be successful as a writer. She wanted her stuff to be performed. Regarding *Piaf,* she wanted a play about a

working-class woman. I don't know why, whether it was simply the idea that, well, if I do a play about Edith Piaf, she's got to sing. Because she is a singer, let's have the songs in the play. Certainly, I know the idea wasn't to do a musical. I mean, the aim was to do a play about Piaf, and I think the play was, was successful. It's far from being one of her best plays, it's perfectly a good play. It shaped her writing in that she thought OK, that worked, let's think of doing more plays that are based on historical characters and this formula where you have a play with music rather than being a musical. And so, she did some others that was in the same vein. But it is only a small number of her plays have songs in them. I mean the play that she did, *Marlene*, which she wrote for Sian Phillips, is in a similar vein really. It's a play with songs. But if you look through her plays, it's odd to have those plays that have been popular like *Piaf* and *Marlene* in a way they are the tip of an iceberg, in terms of the range of different forms that she had. There was a whole series of different sort of particular formats that she used. That was just one of those that happens to have been commercially successful. Sometimes, I think it almost works against her because if you contrast her with someone like Pinter, who I think has a far narrower range as a writer, he manages to kind of just occupy the sort of high ground, high literary ground where people might think her work is rather light because of those plays. So how many of them have songs in them? Well, she did *Pasionaria*, which is somewhat similar, about the Spanish Civil War.

EN: As a survey of history and critical books on women playwrights shows, Pam Gems has received little attention in academia and even as Sue Dunderdale and Jonathan Gems mention, she was overlooked in contemporary British theatre despite the qualified number of her produced plays. How so, why is she not as famous as she should be?

DG: If it's the relationship between the quality of the work in terms of plays that really come alive in a theatre that would get audiences and which one can say that they are really good plays, worth watching and interesting, I think she should be better known than she is. And I think there are several reasons for it. Johnny says this often and I think her is probably right: it is interesting to contrast her with Pinter. If you look at the amount of time that Pinter spent promoting himself through social connections with people, through having relationships with other writers and through working on or promoting the production of work about him. There's even a Pinter theatre in London, you know. I think – if you compare Pam with Harold Pinter, -- the proportion of Pam's time that she spent on promoting herself compared to someone like Pinter is absolutely miniscule. So, I think that for many creative people how well known you are reflects different things. It partly reflects how much you were promoted, you promote yourself, and how good your work is. It is funny, last night I was in Westminster Abbey with my wife looking around at the graves. And it is interesting how you see such a mixture of people, brilliant people, people you've never heard of. And you can see that it's presumably some of those people who have rather large tombs in there are people who were very well connected and promoted themselves furiously during their lifetime.

Pam was almost reclusive. Her main interest was to produce, to write plays and create plays. I guess she probably was ambitious but that went into trying, wanting to write better. Hence there is such a large number of plays that she wrote. So that's part of it. She didn't network. In early 1970's she could have ditched Keith and married Robert Bolt or something, and then spent her time having dinner parties and organizing, working with universities on something. You know, essentially Pam embedding herself and

promoting herself. She just didn't play the game, she didn't promote herself really much at all. What she didn't do was try to create an image of herself; so there is especially among academics, there is a sort of set of buttons that you have to press to be really taken seriously. And some people press those buttons like Pinter.

EN: Is there anything or any memory of Pam you would like to share with us? And you think is revealing for Pam's character?

DG: She was like one of those insects that goes through, that keeps shedding their exoskeleton and then coming out with a different number of legs or with wings. When she was married to Keith before my time, initially I think she was very happy as a middle-class housewife and really content with the children. But when she was growing up with me I think she was increasingly kind of at war with herself. I think she was trying to write and she was full of self-doubt. That's why she never promoted herself, because she couldn't bear to say "I'm so important. I'm the great writer." She couldn't bring herself to do that. She has fundamentally too much self-knowledge to be able to do that. She was somebody who like a great void inside of herself, in a way. She couldn't go around strutting her importance as a writer. And that's how she couldn't get along with some of the other writers, especially the male writers. She had the sense that the egos, she couldn't stand, stomach it. And in the end, that's why I think she withdrew into her private life. But as she started to get better at writing, I think she worked harder and harder at it. And she became more and more on edge. She was really on edge, she was. She would jump, she would bite my father, really. She was just extremely on edge. And I think that the amount of pain that she was in – it was linked to her, her work, and her work was developing fine and she wrote some fine plays during that period. But when

she got older, she changed. And that broken glass and bitterness started to fade away. And it was when she was in her sixties. And then the quality of her writing from that point suddenly soared. It was amazing. It was as if her earlier plays were about thought, and about politics, and about people. Issues, you know. But once she changed into the older Pam, then it was poetry. So, she changed very much over that period.

EN: Thank you David!

Interview with Jonathan Gems

Playwright Jonathan Gems is Pam Gems' oldest son. This interview took place at his home in London on 24 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Jonathan, do you remember when your family moved to London?

Jonathan Gems: Yeah. Late '60s. – Yeah, we were living in the Isle of Wight, that's right. In a place called Bembridge. The Isle of Wight is a little island, at the very southern part of the UK. And my mother was writing a lot; she was writing television plays. And sending them up to London. And, you know, getting replies and having protracted correspondence. It was with the BBC. The other one was called Independent television, ITV. And they had theatre that they did on television. So, she was writing a lot of plays for those. But she wasn't getting anywhere and the reason, she felt, was because she wasn't in London. And, of course, the way things are done, even today, if you want to be a successful playwright or something in London you have to go to dinner parties. Everything is done at dinner parties. You can make appointments to go and see the head of programming or head of the drama but you won't get anywhere. But if you go to a dinner party it's a whole different story. That is where all the decisions are made, that is where everything happens. My father wanted to stay in the Isle of Wight, he liked it there, because his family was there and he liked sailing and it was good for sailing and he had friends there. But, you know, Pam said, "No, we must go to London." So, that was

when I was about 15, 16, 17 around that time, that was when *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* was put on, which was her first play that was financed by my Dad and produced by David Aukin and directed by Roland Rees. And that was a lot of fun. The whole family we worked on the production, getting all sorts of things, publicity, stage management and everything and we enjoyed that. And that play got some attention and got good reviews and so on.

And – that was the beginning. And I think out of that came the next play, which was *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, which was originally called *Dead Fish*, and was done at the Edinburgh Festival. And that was something we all worked on as well. But that got her a sort of entrée into the theatre and she started meeting people and things started to happen. So, she was absolutely right to leave the Isle of Wight and come to London.

EN: Pam in an interview mentioned that *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* was based on the people around me and she mentions that there was a six-piece band in the basement and she has been inspired by the life that had been going on there. Was it your own band?

JG: Oh, yes, that's right. You see, after what happened after Connaught t Square, I don't know why they moved, but anyway, they sold that house and they got a house in Eaton Terrace. Which is near Sloane's Square, near the, the Royal Court Theatre. And Pam was writing there and then we didn't stay there very long. Then we moved to a house in Phillimore Place, which was a wonderful house. It was really big. It had a big, huge basement and, yeah, I lived down there with my sister, and I was in bands at that time. So, we were rehearsing all the time and going out and doing gigs in pubs and things. And yeah, there was a lot of madness going on. And Pam was upstairs and she met everybody. Well, that's probably true. I think one of the girls was based on my girlfriend that she, a

girl called Jean, the youngest one, the one played by Mary Maddox in the play. That was definitely Jean. Yeah. It was my girlfriend. Also, one of the characters was based on Buzz Goodbody who was someone she met through her theatre work.

EN: Another enormous breakthrough of Pam was *Piaf*. Can you comment on its significance?

JG: How theatre used to be in England was you had the West End, which was commercial, and you had the subsidized theatre, which was not commercial, which was funded by the government. So, the National Theatre was funded and the Royal Shakespeare Company were funded by the government, the Royal Court was funded by the government. And there were other theatres that were funded by the government. And the law, the rule, was never the twain shall meet. Because it wasn't fair to the commercial theatre producers to have plays financed by the government going into the West End. Obviously, it is not fair. Because the government has all this money. They are able at the Royal Shakespeare Company to do hundreds of plays, you know, it is easy for them. They've got millions coming in, right. No risk, really. And if something is popular with the public, well they take it into the West End make a shit load of money, right. Well, that is not fair. The guys in the West End who have to scrape together the money to put on a show, have to take all the risk and nine times out of ten they are going to lose that money. So, there was a law, you cannot have a subsidized play in the West End. That was the law. That law was broken by *Piaf*, changed everything. What happened was that actually Trevor Nunn has to be given credit for that, but also my mother as well. Because it happened with *Piaf*. And basically, what happened was that the play was a subsidized play, was done at the, The Other Place, in Stratford upon Avon, and it was a big success,

people loved it, got the most amazing reviews and, you know, packed. So, they thought normally what they would do they would take it down to the small theatre in London and they'd put it on there at the subsidized theatre. That's what they were planning to do. But there was a move among, among people, among the actors particularly, that it was a shame that so few people could see that play because the small theatres were small, I mean like 100 seats, and they were saying, "Look, this should be seen by a big audience." Jane Lapotaire, who played Piaf, was absolutely amazing. She really was phenomenal. Because most people can either sing or they can act but not both. She could do both. And she was a brilliant actress and a fantastic singer.

EN: As a survey of history shows, Pam has received little attention in academia. And when you go and just see how prolific she was, when you see the number of her qualified produced plays, then you'll understand that she was somewhat overlooked in the British theatre, it seems that she was not known as much as she should be. What could be the reason why Pam is not as famous as she should be?

JG: I think it is for the usual reasons. It is the reason Chekov wasn't well known during his lifetime. And a lot of other people. It's because there are fashions in the theatre. And there are cliques, there are groups, there are cabals. And if you want to be successful in the theatre you have to make friends with the right people, you have to hang out with the influential people. There are cliques in the academic world. some playwrights will go to high tea at the Oxford, there is an Oxford College and they will be friends with the provost, or they will be friends with the whoever the fashionable literary professor is. And they will go and have little soirees with critics and they'll meet at dinner parties. You become part of a group and it's I'll scratch my back and you'll scratch mine. So,

you'll have sometimes relationships between directors and playwrights. So, a director will advance his career by doing a particular playwright. The playwright will advance his career by having a director who will sell his plays to management. They all helped each other out. Directors were promoted by writers, actors were promoted by directors. They would all promote one another. And that's why you get what are so called "movements" in literary history. Because that's how people get their work on. People like Pam are unusual. For example, Ibsen wasn't part of a group, and he was treated unfairly. If you read about his life, he wasn't until the very end of his life that he had any recognition. So, I think it's a lot to do with connections. But the funny thing about Pam's work is the audiences like it. But if you're in these groups where you hang out with certain critics or you hang out with certain academics or certain writers and actors and so on, they never talk about the audience, you know, it is not about the audience. It is about how can we get this slot. Well how can we get money for this show or how are we going to get this show done, or how am I going to get this role, or how am I going to get this job directing, or, whatever. It's a business, I mean, you have to do all that and people never talk about the audience. It's not the audience that makes the playwright famous, it's the media.

Also, Pam wrote about things that really matter. We're living in a decadent period. What's in the culture is gender bending and liberalism and this kind of abject tolerance of everything; you can't say anything about anybody, you can't be judgmental. I mean as soon as you abandon your capacity to discern, to judge, you're finished. But that's what people are being told, "No you mustn't judge. You mustn't discriminate. Discrimination, a very bad word." But without discrimination you have nothing. You just have no standards, you have no values, you have nothing. Of course, you have to discriminate. In

fact, discrimination is part of what makes a person wise, and valuable. Because they are able to discriminate between what is positive and what is destructive. These values, you'll find them being played out and promulgated and celebrated in a Pam's plays. But that I don't think has really been discovered by people. I think in a funny way it might have been good that Pam did not become more well known. Because there's that famous saying: If you come across, if you are putting across, or promulgating something that is inconvenient to the authorities then the first thing they do is ignore you, the second thing they do is ridicule you, the third thing they do if you still haven't gone away is they demonize you. And if you still haven't gone away, and the truth that you are promulgating – is getting out there, then they will – say that it's self-evident. They will accept it, and say well, we always knew that. So, in Pam's case she never got even into the ridicule stage, never mind the demonizing space. And part of that was to do with her personality 'cause she was very combative on the page, but in life she wasn't. She was retiring, she would keep her own council, you know. She didn't get into battles into anyone. So she could be ignored, you see. I mean, she was offered to go on lots of TV shows, talk shows and stuff and she always said "No." But if she had done that and she'd started to talk about the substance of her work and so on, she would have attracted a lot of brick bats. I mean, she probably would have been ridiculed and then demonized. Because what she was saying was completely against the current trends of feminism and left-wing socialist liberalism. So, in a way (sigh) she probably made the right decision to, just do it in her work and not go out.

EN: If you want to speak about one personality of Pam that is revealing for her character what's that?

JG: She was somebody who could be a hundred different people. She was a performer. She could be very funny. She could do voices. She could imitate other people very well. She could have been a probably an actress or a comedian but actually she was very, very unhappy, really, deep down. And I think – that affected me. I think as the oldest son, you sort of have a special relationship with your mother in a way and you sort of want to be her champion. You want to, like be a little man protecting her and I was always overwhelmed by her sadness. And there was nothing I could do about it. But she kept it hidden, she was a good actress. Most people didn't realize how profoundly unhappy she was. But I did and it always affected me and you sort of want to do something about it. But at the risk of sounding arrogant or something it's not, it's not meant in that way but – I think one of the main reasons, or one of the reasons she was so unhappy was because she was so alone and she was very alone because of her intelligence. She couldn't communicate with other people because they didn't understand her. I mean, her, her language and her thoughts were too incomprehensible for people that she knew. You know, she didn't have any friends really. I mean she had lots of friends, but she didn't have any real friends, you know, people she could really talk to. What she was saying was that in a sense if you're very intelligent, it's equivalent to being really subnormal in terms of your place in society. You are an outcast. It's a curse in a sense. And the way she dealt with it was by, was through her work. And when it came to dealing with people, friends, society, colleagues, she was an actress. She knew what people were thinking before they said it. She knew what they wanted to hear. She knew how if she said what she wanted to say how they would react and so therefore she was like ahead of everything, everybody and everything all the time. And, and so actually all these people,

probably these people that you interview as well, they will have impressions, certain impressions of Pam. They will tell you oh Pam was like this or Pam was like that. But actually, she was a comedian. She would adjust and adapt to the people she was with because she didn't want conflict with anyone. She didn't have the kind of courage; she was a little bit broken inside. So she was damaged, I think, by her childhood and possibly by her war experiences as well. When you're damaged, your first impulse is to protect yourself. So, I think that was why she was the way she was. She was unknown, I think, to most of her friends [Laughs]. But she nonetheless was a wonderful person to her friends.

EN: If you want to situate Pam in British theatre history, what is her place in your opinion?

JG: It seems to me that most playwrights in the last fifty, sixty years have been what I call "Salieries," that is to say, careerists. In the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties, and right up to today, although you don't make a lot of money directly out of writing plays, there are a lot of fringe benefits and it is a very fashionable thing to be a playwright. So, a lot of people, they go to college and they do literature courses and they conceive the idea that it would be very cool to be a successful playwright. And of course, you can always do movie sales and, there's all kinds of things that can happen. That makes it an attractive profession. You can get into television; there are all sorts of things that can happen if you go in for it. So you get a lot of people who really go in for it because they want to be, to get some recognition, to get a bit of fame, or a bit of attention. And be fashionable, get a good boyfriend or a good girlfriend or whatever. The number of playwrights who write because they have to write, and they'd write whatever the circumstances is relatively few. And I think that is the reason why the fashionable

playwrights tend to be forgotten fairly quickly after they've died. Because fashions change. But the really great playwrights, they never go out of fashion. Because their work isn't written to be fashionable. They are writing from another place. And when I look at English playwrights of the last hundred years, most of them when you really think about it are Salieries, they're careerists. They're people that have a talent that have maybe written one or two plays. But ultimately, they get caught up in the problems of living and surviving as a playwright and they become not corrupted exactly but they become copyists, or they become stylists, you know. Because again there are fashions in the theatre and if you're a playwright you, you want your plays to be produced, so there is a tremendous pressure on you to write things that the managements in this country, the artistic directors, are going to be more likely to put on. So, you know, there is a tremendous tendency to be influenced by that, but the great playwrights never really were. I mean, Ibsen certainly wasn't, Chekov wasn't; Tennessee William did his own thing. Sam Beckett, I'm not sure he's a great playwright, but he certainly was good and original. He did his own thing, he wasn't a careerist. So my mother was the same, she was not a careerist. The number of her original plays prove this. My mother was also a stylist, but in a different way. One of the things that she sort of invented or developed is what has now become quite common which is a film writing for the stage. If you read or see *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi*, it's done in like film sequences, with blackouts and this was something that she devised and no one had really done that before as far as I know. Indeed, it was being done by Sam Shepherd in America. He used a similar style, which he developed independently. So, there must have been something in the air or something at that time that both Pam and Sam Shepherd were sort of developing this particular new

way of writing for the theatre, which really came from the cinema. Pam matured and continued to mature and get better and better. She did become a very major playwright. Very hard core, you know, heavyweight writer. But always entertaining. So that is really what I wanted to see.

EN: Thank you, Jonathan!

Interview with Keith Gems

Keith Gems was Pam Gems' husband. He passed away in 2017. I interviewed him at his home in London on 12 June 2015.

Esmaeil Najar: Dear Keith, when did you meet Pam first?

Keith Gems: At Manchester University. I was studying architecture. She was going to study English but it had a very long cue and there was a very short cue, so she decided to join that. And she found out later it was for psychology. So, she took psychology. And she got a first-class honors degree as a result [laughter].

EN: What were some of the important characteristics of her that attracted people and especially you to her?

KG: Well, she was very gregarious. She was sort of queen of the joint common room. She was witty, well informed, and very funny. And so, she became one of the queens of the university. People who later became well known playwrights and writers and filmmakers and all that kind of stuff. She had a sort of nervous intensity.

EN: How did *Betty's Wonderful Christmas* come about?

KG: I'm glad you asked me that. The point is that we'd been working together, we'd been doing all sorts kinds of different things. And we had an antique shop in Weighbridge and I remember. We were working together. She was a very good antique dealer; she was good at everything, really. But she did like to write little bits. And she did

one or two bits for radio. she did the first one on me and called it *A Builder by Trade* [Laughter]. And, anyway, I realized it was nice to have a wife who also had a nice interest in writing little plays and things and I thought that was really, really good. But of course, I just told you, a little wife who wrote little plays. And I was really busy working in. I had a big studio in Notting Hill, which was a very poor area at the time. And she had this play *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*. I remember she needed my money to get it on, so I paid for it to David Aukin, who actually became Artistic Director of the National Theatre later on. He was a young lawyer at the time and he'd married a wife, Nancy Meckler, who was keen on theatre. And they had no money and I had a little bit by that time. And so I paid for her play and Pam's play to go on. So Pam's play was one for Christmas. And so, you know, she said we're doing it in the afternoon, it was for children. And so I went along, you know. I'm pleased I've got this wife who actually wrote a play. It was a highly extraordinary experience because it was brilliant, utterly brilliant. I didn't know where it came from. My attitude changed at once. I realized at once she was a master of her trade or whatever you like to call it. And I stopped working every afternoon in the office and went and saw the play, every performance. And I couldn't believe it was so good and I don't go to the theatre much. It was just amazing. I then realized that I had a genius on my hand rather than a nice little housewife who was rather clever.

EN: Pam's first commercial success was *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*. What is your memory of that?

KG: I'd just opened the Edinburgh wax museum. I made wax figures, costumes. And in my studio I made all the likenesses of the famous people and I opened the Edinburgh in

the Old Assembly Rooms in the High Street. And I'd only used the ground floor and the basement. The basement was the chamber of horrors. And the ground floor was the history of Scotland. And upstairs there were a whole lot of wonderful rooms. So at the end at the Edinburgh festival I opened all those rooms for different plays. And naturally Pam got priority and they were all there, all the sort of well-known people of the day. They all came and it sort of became the in place to be. Also, being a wax museum, had a beautiful Georgian façade and all that. The old assembly rooms, it was a very special place, so it had a lot of class. And she'd written this play, which of course she put on. Then David Aukin and his colleague thought it was actually terrific. So, they brought it down to Hampstead and they put it on at Hampstead and it was a sell-out and it was extended and then it was put on in the West End. But they didn't like the name, 'cause Pam had called it *Dead Fish*, which isn't really a very inspiring title. So, they changed the name to the name of the four characters in the play. And then it ran for a year in the West End. It was still, three-quarters full. But one of the actresses was becoming more and more pregnant and she would have to be replaced and yet there was that question, should they continue? But they decided to be safe – take it off after a year. But that was her first West End success.

EN: Then *Piaf* came about. Can you speak about *Piaf* and its experience?

KG: Indeed the Royal Shakespeare Company produced it. They'd heard about *Piaf*, somehow or other, I don't know how because nobody knew much about it, and they came down to see her and I remember this young director from the RSC on the doorstep, there was this rather chunky middle-aged woman opens the door of this Gothic sort of Revival house, and he asked for Pam, Pam Gems [laughter], waiting for somebody else to come

[Laughs]. He hasn't recognized her at first. Anyway, then he discussed the play, and they decided they'd put it on at The Other Place in Stratford, just as an experiment. And so that's what they did and of course it was a sell-out. And then the RSC, who'd never put a play on outside Stratford, decided they would put it on in the West End in conjunction with another play, I'm not quite sure what it was but they didn't know what to do. What happened was that Pam's play, which was three days, and the other play which was for three days, Pam's play was full up the other play was empty. So they couldn't really carry on with the 50 per cent audience for too long, they weren't making any money. So it came off. Although it was full up, booked up, as it came off. And then of course, they got their act together. They decided that they would risk putting this play on by itself, you know, in a theatre and it ran for God knows how long, and it went all around the world.

EN: Was it difficult to live with a famous playwright?

KG: No! Not at all. Because I'd already finished my career. I'd been in international business, I'd been living in San Francisco and Canada, and – I'd been sort of established from tax point of view, I lived in Jersey, and then in Spain. And all the rest of it. So, I'd made my money and so I didn't want more than I needed. I don't know why anybody ever does, really. So, it was fine. I was able to support Pam, which I did. I really enjoyed it, I mean, she had various talents which I didn't have. And I had talents that she didn't have. And they worked together very well. 54 years we were married, and in the end when she got Alzheimer I stood by her all the time and I'm really glad I did. She was difficult to live with, but what is wrong with a challenge. I wouldn't have it any other way.

EN: Are there any story or memory about Pam that you would like to share with us and would be revealing for her character?

KG: All right. Well, she had a sort of intellectual honesty which gave her the excuse to be honest whenever she was thinking and she had reason to change her mind quite a lot. So that her honesty could be rather complex to me. But I got used to it and actually she was more honest than I was because I tended to have a direction and I tended to alter things to fit my direction whereas she listened to what was happening and made the direction from where she was, which was a little bit different. But as relationships go, apart from a full midlife crisis, which I think we all go through, which went on for a little bit, she had a little bit of a problem of my choosing my friends. But she didn't like my friends. In fact, she wasn't very good at making friends. And so the only way that I could have a social life was without Pam. I did try but she didn't, she didn't like my friends. That's fair enough. They were rather different. But anyway, she got used to the idea that I had to have a life, if I lived my life around her totally I would be, you know, mean. And so she got used to it and it worked very well. I was always there for her first. But then I had a boat. I went sailing with my friends; had a narrow boat on the canal at Little Venice where I used to do all my entertaining because she didn't like me bringing people home. I used to have meetings of poets and painters and people every Thursday and I had a lovely heated pool in the garden and so we'd have some food and we'd read poetry and talk about different things and then we'd all take our clothes off and go sit in the pool after dark with candles and stuff. And we'd sit in the warm water and carry on with our fascinating conversations [Laughs]. Pam didn't like that at all. So, you know, I had to solve that one. But having solved that one, it went really well.

EN: Pam never promoted herself as a playwright, what could be the reason for that?

KG: yes, you are right. Pam didn't seek celebrity. The point was when she was much younger she had a certain amount of push. But somehow rather, as she got older she got, she really frightened, basically, inside. She built up a wall to hide her fear. And somehow, she deliberately didn't go and see others. She was invited to go and meet various important people in the theatre and film. She deliberately did not take up the invitations. Let alone hang about in the hopes that somebody might talk to her or she could, you know, be seen. So, she really hid away more and more as she got older. And it was pure talent that made people want to see her work. Not down to her at all.

EN: Thank you, Keith.

Interview with Lesley Ferris

Lesley Ferris is a Distinguished Professor of Theatre at The Ohio State University. She directed Gems' *Queen Christina* at the Middlesex Polytechnic (now Middlesex University) in the early 1980's. This interview took place at Lesley Ferris' home in Columbus, Ohio on 12 December 2016.

Esmaeil Najar: Lesley, after you got your Ph.D. from University of Minnesota, you moved to London, am I right? Or have you already moved to London before that?

Lesley Ferris: I moved in '78, I had to go back and defend it in the fall of '78 and then the graduation was not until '79, I didn't go to it.

EN: It is when you started your own theatre, The Mouth and Trousers, in London. How did it come about?

LF: Well, I had several interviews for jobs, academic jobs in the US. Well, for various reasons, I didn't get them. I was at a conference where they wanted to interview people. I was very interested in Bertolt Brecht and obviously the work I'd done was very Brechtian and the people who interviewed me were horrified, the Americans. I got a real vibe that Americans aren't interested in Brecht, which they aren't, I mean in general as compared to the British and other parts of Europe. My personal life trumped that in the sense that I was moving to London at some point and I decided I would start a theatre company and I was inspired by André Benedetto and the other you know Ariane Mnouchkine and it was

a place to do theatre. And I was just lucky that I was there at a time that the fringe theater was well established but kind of in its glory.

EN: How Thatcherism impacted fringe at that time?

LF: During the Thatcher era, the arts were cut dramatically; however, that didn't stop them. People were figuring out how to do things in different ways, how to get funding differently. The GLA, Greater London Authority actually had a Labor mayor that during much of the 80s they were funding things. So, London was getting some sort of funding and they were supporting it, the arts and things like that. So, that was an interesting time, and the fact is that in terms of theatre then you could get a venue like the venue I had, it was a pub in Camden Town, ideal location and they had an upstairs room that was available and they rented it to us for five pounds a week. It was, as long as we brought in customers.

EN: This period also coincided with the prosperous years of women's groups and feminist theatre. What was in the air that united women? Was it the Women's Movement? Was it the flourishing of alternative spaces?

LF: I think there was no single reason. Always when there is a big shift like that there's many reasons. There is so many things happening simultaneously where people were on the streets protesting. If it was to do with the mines being closed in the UK or the Vietnam War or the 1968 protests when the students took to the street demanding better rights in their own education as well as trying to transform aspects of the way capitalism was working in the in the culture. So, I don't think it's any single reason, but I think a lot of it had to do with it during the both the first World War and the second World War, women had to do jobs that they were not allowed to do before and now that war is over,

and so women now have ideas about what is possible because they were doing it, or their mothers were doing it. And I think the fact that theatre historically has been a male dominated art form extremely so considering that the bodies of women were not even employed for you know millennia. So, women who were interested in doing theatre all were noticing this and also the fact that the education system in the UK: the first theatre degrees started in the -60s, the first at universities it was very late, it wasn't like in the US. The first degree to get a degree in theatre was in the 60s. So, of course women are going to be in those degree programs. So, there is this huge wave of women getting the opportunity to go to the university for the first time.

EN: When did you first hear about Pam Gems?

LF: I did hear about *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* - That was the end of the 70s. When I ran the theatre company, I worked with other women artists at other fringe theatres. Twice we did women's seasons, joint women's seasons with the Tricycle Theatre, the Oval House, and the New the York in Albany, the Mouth and Trousers Company. During one of Women in Theatre conferences - I remember I heard Pam Gems talk at one of those. I definitely had heard of her. The productions that I had seen of Pam Gems work though was *Camille* and *Queen Christina*.

EN: You also directed one of her plays, *Queen Christina*?

LF: Well, I proposed that as one of the possible pieces to the Middlesex University where I was teaching. I proposed *Queen Christina* because it was a very heavily women-centered piece. Everybody agreed to that - they were glad that it was a woman playwright. One of the kind of challenges with that piece, in terms of casting it with students, is that there is a whole lot of male roles and not so many female roles even

though the whole story is about a woman. But it is in that time and era that the world was like that. So, I did have women cross dressing and things like that and kind of paralleling Christina's own life, she also dressed as a man. I also tried to get more female roles in the piece, so one of the things I did was I took the main role of Queen Christina and I had two women playing her. My concept was that Queen Christina was two people in the way that any royal person is. You are the royal person but you are also yourself. But hers was even more than that in the sense that she was a woman, a girl child who was brought up as a male and then expected to lead her country in her royal position, but at the same time to become a woman now because they needed heirs for the throne, male heirs for the throne. So there was a doubleness that I thought I could play on in terms of giving two women the parts so and how it was set up - the two of them were playing young children, as Queen Christina, I think there might be a scene where that happens; and they had a stuffed doll and they ripped it apart and there was a special prop that was made so they could do it multiple times. And so they each had a half of this doll that kind of represented themselves and that set up the dynamic. I think one of them had male costume and the other had female costume as well in the course of the play.

EN: You also met with Pam Gems, am I right?

LF: Yes. So, another thing that happened at Middlesex that affected me greatly as a teacher, and as an artist, was that they had a particular unusual degree, a BA in performance art. Every year they admitted 75 students to it: 25 music, 25 dance, and 25 drama. And there was a class in the second year of the degree that had a generic title "social historical studies." So, the idea was that class would be totally interdisciplinary. The department would offer three classes and then the students would choose which one

they wanted to do. So, I proposed to do a "women in performance" class. So, they were delighted with that and they encouraged me to do that. So that's how the *Queen Christina* production came about. So, the year that I was directing *Queen Christina* and teaching that class, I invited Pam Gems. I had a little budget that I could have brought her to campus and given her an honorarium. She was very sweet and lovely and she said: "no I don't want to come to campus but you and your students can come to my house." Wow! What an offer. And I'm fairly sure she also said, "And I don't expect any money. I'd be delighted to talk about that play with your students and you." I have to say I was a bit nervous. But it was a lovely session. I don't know how many students actually came. I think it was about 10, because it was outside the normal. And I think the actors in the show were there. I remember sitting in her living room and just having this wonderful warm hearted and very articulate discussion with her with the students myself and Pam talking about the importance of focusing on the women in the work she was doing.

EN: It is difficult to perceive how the male-dominated RSC produced this show. Some critics believe that this play does not pursue feminist causes because at the end of the play, Christina yearns motherhood and is somewhat defeated by her past life. What was your take of the play?

LF: I did see the play as a feminist piece because for me, particularly at that moment in time and even if I was seeing it now it is about retrieving a female figure from history and giving her a voice. And even though for some feminists and some folks and some critics that she went against whatever it might be in terms of her own life, for me what's really important is that her story is being told and it is being examined and talked about and that she is back in the canon so to speak in a way she hadn't been for centuries. Not every

woman that dramatic character is some kind of ideal feminist, they are complicated. Life is complicated. So, I do think it's feminist from that point of view and also the fact that it shows, it exposed the patriarchal system. So,

EN: Gems is an important playwright who created lots of significant plays like *Duse, Fish, Stas & Vi, Queen Christina,* and *Piaf*. Why she is overlooked in academia against all her achievements?

LF: It is a dilemma, which of course you are going to be exposing in your own research. But, I feel the women playwrights who are more like Caryl Churchill, like Sarah Kane, they are much more experimental with language and with the structure of plays. I think that's Pam's storytelling techniques, which I still think are quite extraordinary - they play on the stage wonderfully; but because the other ones were much more experimental, that kind of experimental mode has been taken up by the critical world for some reason. I'm sure she is going to have a renaissance. I'm sure she will.

EN: Is there anything that you want to add to this interview.

LF: Yeah, there is one thing that she said at this conference I attended and it really affected me. One of the things that happens in a political movement particularly one that has been going on for centuries about women is the term "you are preaching to the converted." It is a term that I have always personally hated. And at one big conference I remember it was the ICA in London and Pam was on a panel and the room was packed by several hundred people, and someone raised her hand and asked the panel who were all theatre people writing or directing feminist work: "aren't you just preaching to the converted?" And Pam took the question and she gave this explanation where she basically said, "the converted need to be preached to as well." They need it. We need it,

we need to hear these things. And it kind of like, yes of course. Obviously, that is why all of us got upset by it. I understand the point… and she also made a point that the people that say that are the ones that want to deflate that movement. That are critical of the movement. "Oh, you're not talking to the world at large, you're just talking to your little chic section, you know, you are women or you are white, or whatever. So, she took apart that in a way that gave me great comfort over the years. Although I've heard it said numerous times since then. It won't go away but I just felt wow, thank you Pam, thank you Pam for that.

EN: Thank you, Lesley!