

# 17%

**supporting and promoting  
female playwrights**

October 2010

## Summer's almost done...

*In the first newsletter of Autumn, we catch up with the summer's events*



*L-r: Irene Cockcroft , Sam Hall, Cheryl Robson,  
Winsome Pinnock and Susan Croft at Women and  
Theatre discussion, 4 September 2010  
(Thanks to Aurora Metro Press for image)*

After what seems like too short and far too cold a summer break, 17% is back. We didn't entirely have the summer off and took part in some events and met some new people.

In May, I represented 17% at the London Playwrights' Collective Networking Party, introducing 17% to those who hadn't heard of it. The LPC is an excellent organisation and if you are based in London is a good one to consider joining. They offer courses and networking opportunities for a yearly subscription. ([www.londonplaywrights.co.uk](http://www.londonplaywrights.co.uk))

One of the people I met over the summer was Nadine from Euphoric Ink and she's offering 17% newsletter subscribers 1/3 off her November weekend playwriting course. The offer expires 8 October - so be quick.

I also met up with the Tricycle Theatre who had an excellent 'Women, Power and Politics' season over the summer. They're really nice

people and do some good programming across their theatre, cinema and gallery spaces, so are worth checking out if you are in London.

Finally, last month I was part of a panel (pictured above) to discuss Women in Theatre at the Orange Tree Theatre. This was an interesting experience as many of the views expressed by the audience had been voiced before at the 17% events in March of this year. That particular week was not a good one for female playwrights on London stages. The percentage had actually dipped to a new low - slightly under 10% - although we were receiving a bit more press coverage due to Nell Leyshom's *Bedlam*; the first play by a woman to be staged at the Globe. So as ever, there are some green shoots, but still a lot of work to be done and we're back and raring to do it, hope you are too!

Sam Hall, Oct 2010

17%

# Attached - or otherwise?

*Playwright Shiona Morton shares her experiences of an attachment at Bristol Old Vic*

I was in Kirkcudbright a few weeks ago. It's a town in south-west Scotland which, like St Ives, has a reputation for drawing artists to its light and landscape. There, from about 1915 Jessie King, one of the famed "Glasgow Girls" operated a kind of artist's colony where fellow artists could come and rent somewhere to live and create. The artists could busy themselves with their solitary work but had the company and support of others when they wanted it. Of course it probably sounds far more glam than it was, what with Dorothy L Sayers popping by to write the odd whodunnit, but standing in the sunny Scottish street nearly a hundred years on I wished I could join in.

As a playwright I constantly shift from needing time and space to work, to longing for contact with other people. I live in Devon and while I have a good network of writing colleagues I have to travel about thirty miles to discuss an idea face-to-face or to see a piece of theatre. Of course this should be excellent for my concentration but as we all know, home is full of tricky little distractions. Last autumn I was offered an attachment at Bristol Old Vic. Two delicious days per week in the city over an eight week period: sixteen days to experiment with a new idea uncluttered by commission or specific project. All this in a theatre building where lots of interesting things were happening and where I could dip in to performances as I wished. I have to say it suited me down to the ground.

I respond well to going to work in a place other than home. At the beginning of the attachment I met with Sharon Clarke, the Literary Producer and decided on a series of meetings where we would discuss my progress. This helped me plan my time and gave me a sense of achievement. It was wonderful to have this interested attention and meant that I didn't get stuck with unworkable or unwieldy elements in the play. It kept up my commitment and enthusiasm and I made speedy progress through the piece I was writing.



Of course there has to be a balance between individual graft and using the help or advice of others. Sometimes just talking over an idea can be useful. I attend a retreat at Totleigh Barton which is run by writers for writers. It offers a week of quiet where I can work in solitude during the day and meet other writers in the evening to eat and chat though sometimes the most illuminating conversations occur over a quick cuppa in the kitchen. I visited a friend from the retreat in her Glasgow studio this summer. Run by Wasps (Workshop and Artists' Studio Provision Scotland Ltd)), The Briggait is a converted fish market with rooms available for artists: playwrights and performers, visual artists and theatre companies. It's a lovely contemporary environment where artists can peaceably work or occasionally knock on a neighbour's door. Sounds good to me.

As writers we all need to find the conditions which produce our best work and it may change depending on what we are writing, but for me the context of lively discussion and support, fairly near at hand, is a great benefit, and my experiences of it over the last year have I think, helped me write better. So I'd say, definitely attached is better.

Shiona's first play *Baby Bank* was set in her native Glasgow and produced at The Everyman Theatre Cheltenham in 2004. Since then she has written *At the Hop* for Forest Forge Theatre Company (2005), *The Rain Has Voices* (2006 Play for Somerset), *Bailey Bridge* for NTC Touring (2007), and *The Gliding Hour* for The Point Young Peoples' Theatre, Eastleigh (2007). Theatre West in Bristol produced *Mary Mary* (2007) and *Shut Up* (2008). In 2008 Shiona created *Seaworthy* a site-specific performance for Plymouth's Hidden City Festival. Last year Shiona was writer-on-attachment at The Bristol Old Vic, and in 2011 she will be writing for Tangle Theatre's *A Drop to Drink* and Theatre Royal Plymouth's Playhouse Project.

# Reading list

## *Reviews and reading suggestions*

### **Classic plays by women from 1600 – 2000** Ed: Susan Croft, Aurora Metro Press 2010.

One of the issues raised by the Women in Theatre discussion at The Orange Tree Theatre was that texts by female playwrights are harder to find and it's a vicious circle as they then don't find their way onto the curriculum and the students then don't pass on their knowledge of them as they haven't been given that knowledge in the first place. I think we all recognise this is one problem that could be easily solved and Aurora Metro Press seeks to address this by publishing this anthology, the first to present plays across 400 years in one volume.

In her introduction, Susan Croft admits that creating such an anthology of 'classic plays' is problematic. The introduction discusses the plays in context, which is a useful overview to the history of women's playwriting. She also describes many of the issues that women playwrights and their plays face; acknowledging that it's for a number of complex reasons that theatres do not put on as many plays written by women as by men. It was only in 2008 that a play by a woman was commissioned and performed at The National, and in 2010 The Globe staged its first by a woman. These small victories that happen once in a blue moon are all the more bittersweet, as they attain a large amount of press coverage saying that female playwrights have finally made it, but the fact is still that they are rarities.

This anthology contains an interesting selection. There are extracts from Hroswitha (the earliest known female playwright), Elizabeth Carey and Caryl Churchill. Other plays are reproduced in entirety - The Rover (Aphra Behn), A bold stroke for a wife (Susanna Centlivre), De montfort (Joanna Baillie), Rutherford and son (Githa Sowerby), The Chalk Garden (Enid Bagnold and Stones in his pockets by Marie Jones.

Hopefully collections such as this will start to chip away at one of the problems: the problem of education (or lack of). The availability of collections like this is crucial if we are ever to get the statistics up.

... And if this has whetted your appetite: one of our Kent members makes some more reading list suggestions: '20 female playwrights I studied at University. They are a varied and diverse bunch - ranging from established playwrights with a large body of work (such as Caryl Churchill) to more obscure writers who may have only written one or two plays, to performance artists (physical theatre) such as Pina Bausch'.

Caryl Churchill, Sue Townsend, Shelagh Delaney, Wendy Kesselman, Deborah Levy, Sarah Kane, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Diane Samuels, Marsha Norman, Mary O'Malley, Winsome Pinnock, Helene Cixous, Jenny Kemp, April De Angelis, Ntozake Shange, Marguerite Duras, Sheila Yeger, Pina Bausch, Sarah Daniels, Jane Martin.

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Got something you'd like to share? Send your news and views to:  
[17percentcampaign@gmail.com](mailto:17percentcampaign@gmail.com)

*17percent aims to redress the current gender imbalance in plays being produced in the UK, by providing women with opportunities to develop as writers, through peer-to-peer networking and educational opportunities, championing women's achievements in the theatre, promoting female writers and providing positive female role models and inspirations.*

# Euphoric Ink Special 17% offer

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'A very gifted teacher who taught me a huge amount in a very short space of time and really inspired me ... I loved the variety: exercises, games, working in pairs and groups, reading things out, listening to what other people had written etc. There was a constant changing of gears and that was incredibly engaging and a great way of learning.' Pearl Doherty, Video Director, course participant.

'A thoroughly inspirational weekend. My head is brimming with ways to tackle some of the problems I've had with my writing. What a luxury too, to spend an entire weekend, talking purely plays and writing.' Sarah Thomas, Technical Assistant, course participant.

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- Organic lunches, fair trade coffee and drinks on both days.
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