

EPISODE 5: Women in Theatre – A Very British Patriarchy

Andrew Muir 31:31

Hi, I'm Andrew Muir, creative director at Ardent Theatre. If you enjoyed the show, please share, subscribe and leave us a five star review. Thanks for listening.

Go to a typical UK theatre show. And for every ten people in the audience, seven will be women. This isn't new. Surveys in the 1980s showed that at least half of theatre audiences were women at that time. Much like today, in fact, the most important and prestigious jobs in theatre were held by men. Women faced a glass ceiling made of stone.

Susan Croft 32:02

One of the key stereotypes about women directors was that women were okay on the small scale. But large scale plays like Pravda, that sort of meaty work couldn't be done by women.

Andrew Muir 32:15

I'm Andrew Muir and this is activism in the eighties, where we shot the protests and culture wars that changed lives in Britain, Ireland and beyond. In this episode, three female theatre professionals unpack the challenges for women and women's theatre. At that time.

Directors who Dunderdale hosts this conversation with historian and dramaturg Dr. Susan Croft and producer Jill Lloyd.

Gill Lloyd 32:47

We were working in that field of kind of performance alternative theatre work that didn't quite fit into anybody else's category. So we were in a lone furrow to begin with. And outside we started in 79. We were all woman organisation for office, probably 15 or 20 years. We didn't employ any men and we worked with some male artists. And when we did employ a man, John Ashford joined us for a while after I think he'd been at the place when he was working for us. He was great, he was a pleasure to work with. But when people from outside came in, Oh, can we talk to the governor? Was the approach always?

Sue Dunderdale 33:28

He was an extraordinary artistic director because at the ICA, I very early on took a play by Melissa murray about three women getting drunk and talking about their lives, and he produced it for us. We did it there at the ICA and I remember one stopping to say thanks to him as I was because I'd known him briefly at Manchester University, and he said, Well, I have to confess, I hate

the play, but I thought I should be doing work that I didn't like, not just reflected me, which is I've never heard any other artistic director say.

Susan Croft 34:02

I'm sure.

Gill Lloyd 34:06

Yes. I mean, the kind of influential women that we were working with and we weren't particularly influential at that time. We were financially struggling as a young organisation, as outside men and seeing lots of influential women in Europe, people running venues and being quite big producers. But we weren't seeing that for ourselves in England. And the same for the artists. To be honest, the artists were getting big fees in Europe and struggling in England, so that was quite a parallel. But I mean, I suppose the woman artists that we worked with in the eighties who was quite high profile or is now is Bobby Baker, she forged her own way with her very kind of personal performance work and was one of the big artists that outside of that time.

Susan Croft 34:48

Jerry Pilgrim was she.

Gill Lloyd 34:50

Jerry was in and out of us. I mean I mean, Jerry was around with the people's show when she had her company and she was based then in the People Show studios, and then she did bits of work in and out of outside men in the early days. But then she went off and had her own funding for a while and her own company.

Sue Dunderdale 35:09

What was her company called?

Susan Croft 35:11

No hesitation.

Gill Lloyd 35:12

Demonstrations, I say. Yes, that's right. Yeah. Yeah.

Sue Dunderdale 35:15

She was very early.

Gill Lloyd 35:16

Influence for me and often people now who see shows like Punchdrunk don't really know about Jerry Pilgrim's work now, which is really sad.

Susan Croft 35:25

Absolutely. I mean, truly. Yes. Amazing show at Toynbee Studio. An amazing show, not an immersive theatre in the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital and some incredible stuff that was it transformed a space.

Sue Dunderdale 35:38

True of a lot of people who do physical and performance work. Now, they have no idea of all the work that was developing through the sixties and into the seventies, which is sad.

Susan Croft 35:57

In terms of what was going on in the eighties. I remember I would go through Time magazine on a weekly basis and then later city limits, and I would underline every time I saw a woman writer or a woman director in the West End listings and the whole of West End listings, there were few and far between, but there were certain venues where the work was happening, and I hung out a lot at Oval House under Kate Critchley, who programmed such a fascinating array of work also at So. So when did you start it?

Sue Dunderdale 36:31

So I started as associate in 83, I think, and I took over as artistic director in 84.

Susan Croft 36:37

Right. So I was a Soho guide. So probably when you were. Yeah.

Sue Dunderdale 36:41

And we did quite a lot of female playwrights.

Susan Croft 36:44

Exactly. So and then the drill hall and there were probably a few other places where things happened from time to time, but it was all the alternative venues where the work was happening and very, very few in Royal Court, maybe Max Stafford Clarke, whose name were no longer allowed to.

Sue Dunderdale 37:01

Mention, were allowed to mention it.

Susan Croft 37:02

But actually, you know, he did an amazing amount of work in terms of supporting women playwrights, actually.

Sue Dunderdale 37:07

And also controlling them, I have to say.

Susan Croft 37:10

Well, that's another thing.

Sue Dunderdale 37:12

But I know.

Susan Croft 37:12

Develop in Carol Churchill's work with that stock and so on, and helping sort of find the context in which to develop amazing plays like Cloud nine and Light Shining in Buckinghamshire and so forth. That model of writing, which were obviously really important and collaborating with other actors and then later with dancers and other artists. And so on, really important in terms of her experiment. So I was kind of going to see whenever I could afford it, any woman playwright could find, I think, theatre if black women brought their show Chiaroscuro to Soho.

Sue Dunderdale 37:45

Soho, did they? Yeah. And I was then.

Susan Croft 37:47

Think it would have been in the eighties.

Sue Dunderdale 37:49

When I left in 88 and I went to Greenwich and I employed women directors there, Sue Wilson and Penny Burns and put on plays by Wendy McCloud, American Melissa murray and so on, but got accused of what was it. Somebody on the board said there are too many ladies around here and not enough meat. It wasn't a pleasant environment to work in Greenwich, but we did start to change things. But there weren't many role models for us or other women working in establishment theatre. We were all an alternative theatre. So that's what led to the Standing Conference of Women theatre directors and administrators and our quest with that to put pressure on the establishment to employ and nurture women directors and playwrights. Have you any thoughts about that kind of pressure on the establishment or the interaction between the alternative and the establishment? If there was any or it had any impact?

Gill Lloyd 38:58

I think it was everywhere. Everything from going to see the accountants to the lawyers, to anybody else. We were kind of treated as girls who needed a bit of fatherly help and advice, and

that really sticks that that was how we were treated. And I'm sure with a lot of the older men working in theatre, we were seen the same way these kind of young women trying to forge ahead with this company. It was hard to be taken seriously, really hard, and with the funders too, and it took years and years to get outside funded as its own organisation, with its own artistic plans, etc..

Sue Dunderdale 39:39

The Arts Council could be very helpful, but also very obtuse. I remember endless arguments about they give you money for workshop work for writers, and I'd be saying, But what really helps a writer to develop are productions, especially at somewhere like the Soho. You know, we turned over, we were doing six or seven productions a year paid, and that really moves the writer on, and that was really hard to get through to them because it was a bit more expensive.

Susan Croft 40:10

Yeah, yeah. I started going I guess round about the mid eighties to various stunning conference events and I know they also had events which I think they sponsored at the drill hall where you as a young woman aspiring to be a director, which is what I was at that point. You could go along and meet other women directors of the women directors and hear about their experience. And that's a really important fact. I've been talking to Young Woman three as I from university recently, and she's saying there's nothing like that now, and that they want that same sense of mentorship and passing on experience and so on. Even though things now are so much better in that there are women running buildings and a number that just, you know, wasn't the case back then. And then Women's Playhouse Trust, which just in terms of the visibility, both of women writers, directors and actually women's history in the theatre and the fact that they put on the lucky chance for Ben play at a time when nobody was putting on for Ben and then did and his auctioneers spell number seven. So African-American work, early work. There was this history that was so really important. They had a series of workshops about putting women centre stage, which included some workshops using psychodrama for women to kind of look at what were the obstacles, the internalized obstacles to success, the fact that you hadn't been brought up to see yourself as having any authority, and then obviously bank managers and so on, assuming that you don't have any authority equally. So how are you going to build up that sense of being a director, being a person in charge when the whole of it was Socialisation has worked against that and that was fascinating.

Sue Dunderdale 42:03

I mean, standing conference funding conference of women theatre directors, administrators, the worst title in the world was very influential over that first two

or three years, 82 to about 83, 84. And then Women's Playhouse Trust came out of that. I had to argue with the ICA to be able to have a women only event, and there was a big All Women event at the Young Vic, which had all the writers you can think of Carol Churchill, Beryl Bainbridge, Sage, Angela Carter. That was an extraordinarily influential conference. And then it was out of those discussions that Pam Gems me, Sue Parrish, Rosemary Squire decided to start a women's Playhouse trusts. And then Jill's right joined us. And when some of us drifted off, Jules continued it. And it had a big influence, apart from the fact that we never got the theatre. And I still think there's room for a theatre dedicated to women's work, directing, acting and writing.

Susan Croft 43:06

And I think the other key thing that they did and then subsequently Women's Theatre Group was Sphinx, Was it because Dead was gathering? The statistics actually say, okay, how many women are employed in what roles? And particularly in IT directors.

Sue Dunderdale 43:21

And influential.

Susan Croft 43:22

Directors, and how many women playwrights are getting producers and so on? And then there's a correlation that you can see immediately when there are women in charge that they are doing more work.

Sue Dunderdale 43:31

But there are very few women in charge of establishment companies. And the major female playwright was Agatha Christie.

Susan Croft 43:39

Yeah, and some of the sexism, I mean, there was a quote, which maybe it was apocryphal in some level male artistic director saying, of course I'd employ a woman, I'd also employ a one legged Chilean refugee. And it was equally absurd that employing a woman as a director.

Sue Dunderdale 43:54

I can't remember either its standing conference or Women's Playhouse trust, but we went to meet with the artistic directorship at the National Theatre and they were all men, and they brought Gillian Diamond, who was a casting director and she was fantastic. She came and sat on the side of the table with us and argued with them. Basically their stance was We employ the best. And when you try to examine what the best was, it was them. So it was a circular argument.

Susan Croft 44:20

You know, they need to employ an occasional woman to do a platform performance and then they are see, I think they would have a woman staff director, another woman would come in and then she'd leave.

Sue Dunderdale 44:30

Exactly. Yes.

Susan Croft 44:31

But for a woman to be.

Sue Dunderdale 44:33

And I think it was through those organisations and our work when we were in leadership positions that we were pushing for more equality. What about work on South Africa or with anti-apartheid or with the miners strike, which was 84 to 85?

Gill Lloyd 44:53

Well, with South Africa, it's quite interesting that just through the lack of knowing Mary Benson, that my relationship was with the ANC and that in a sense was far easier and more direct and the anti-apartheid movement probably didn't like what I was doing very much because they felt it was muddying the waters. I mean, all the shows that we brought had been approved by the ANC people in South Africa. And I remember when I brought you strike the woman, you strike the rock. We did a week in each area of London, and I had a real struggle with the anti-apartheid movement in Hammersmith. They were basically saying that I must be exploiting these people. And then the women in strike, the woman they just laid into, the guy who was leading the anti-apartheid movement and saw him off basically that was quite complex in that we were working sort of circumventing almost the anti-apartheid movement in the UK who were supposedly garnering the support for the ANC and for what was happening in South Africa. So it was quite a complex relationship that happened across those areas, but they were very powerful women who, no matter what had happened to them in South Africa, they certainly found their voices when they were talking to us. Yeah.

Sue Dunderdale 46:10

But we Soho, we had a lot to do with the striking miners, you know, all alternative theatre did then. We couldn't give any proceeds from a production because of Arts Council rules, but we did a Sunday night benefit because we didn't perform Sundays then. And then a bucket collection for miners who came down. It was the miners wives and miners who came down. We

organised here we go. The miners wives benefit at the Piccadilly Theatre in the end of November 1984, which was a fantastic event, and every well-known actress you can think of then Juliet Stevenson, Jane LaPorta, Julie Walters, they were all on stage doing their thing and the women came down in coach loads and that was a fantastic event.

Susan Croft 47:02

Well, I was coming up to see some of that work. I was in Colchester and so they were bringing coal in through Wivenhoe, so we were going down to join the pickets there and also did a cabaret. I think in the student baths to support the miners and so on. But so I wasn't very directly involved in that. But I do remember forces were players coming over, so I know what would that have been like 88 or something?

Gill Lloyd 47:25

86, 86. They toured then for several years all over the place.

Susan Croft 47:30

But I remember because there's a nice link there for conference women theatre directors and administrators as I produced a conference called Interventions, because we saw that there were a number of shows which were centrally focused on women or directed by women, and they were on a larger scale because one of the key stereotypes about women directors was how women were okay on the small scale.

Sue Dunderdale 47:57

Domestic educational theatre.

Susan Croft 47:59

Or, you know, little space for looking at family dynamic or whatever it might be. But large scale plays like Pravda, which was on around that time. Yeah, the National Theatre and had a cast of about 23, I think it was, of which six were women, that sort of meaty work which told a whole society that stuff couldn't be done by women because they only worked on that small scale. So this conference interventions looked at D'Souza Rodriguez, who had brought Donald Giovanni for C-suite players and I think a show from the then Yugoslavia. So trying to explode those stereotypes, saying, well, actually women could do that work. We're just not given the resources and the large spaces to work in. And so that needed to be challenged. And as late as the nineties, I think Nicholas Hytner was still coming out with that sort of stuff about women directors and what. They could or couldn't do.

Sue Dunderdale 48:59

That brings me to Pam Gems, who's one of the biggest feminist names in that period she sent. I think Camille or Queen Christina, one of them, to the Royal Court, and they sent it back to her because it would be more attractive to women than men. I mean, it was very, very blatant, The consciousness that women were over 50% of the audience, which was one of the things we discovered in the survey, that more women were going to the theatre than men. And often it was women who took their male partners if they had male partners to the theatre. And yet all the establishment theatres were run by men at that time.

Gill Lloyd 49:41

And this is still the case. There was something, one of the weekend newspapers about the fact that most theatre tickets are booked by women and men go along because they've been taken away. They really instigate it as a kind of very general rule in a family situation.

Susan Croft 49:58

And the women that are making the choices. Yeah, exactly. To a country address the meaning of publicity.

Sue Dunderdale 50:04

Were the major female voices that were speaking out for women's theatre outside of alternative theatre that you can think of apart from Pam Gems, Carol Churchill, although she was still really in alternative theatre.

Susan Croft 50:21

I guess there was starting to be work at the Royal Court to some extent, more women there. I'm struggling at the moment to think of names, but.

Sue Dunderdale 50:30

Carol Churchill, Carol.

Susan Croft 50:32

Churchill was kind of the key.

Sue Dunderdale 50:33

Yes, she was the key writer. Sarah Daniels.

Susan Croft 50:37

Yes. Masterpieces was important to developing then.

Sue Dunderdale 50:42

But there were so few women in leadership positions in that world privately. I know that women who were establishment administrators like Janice de Mackintosh and Gillian Diamond were supportive, but they weren't speaking out publicly about the discrimination, really the lack of representation of women in the establishment theatre.

Susan Croft 51:09

I know that the conference women theatre directors and administrators did an event called The Casting of the Woman at Theatre Administrator, and about the sort of stereotypes which attached to her. And as you say now, it's not called administrators, which sort of tends to suggest a support role. Producer has much more status in itself, and that's actually what was happening. I mean, this was the often single individual who was supporting a whole company and doing the booking and the marketing and the fundraising and the sponsorship of any and all of that. Yeah, but was seen as this sort of support role. And, you know, was she your mum, was she your accountant? Well, these stereotypes which are tied to.

Gill Lloyd 51:49

This all about facilitating and yet being.

Sue Dunderdale 51:52

Being the.

Gill Lloyd 51:53

Managing, managing.

Sue Dunderdale 51:55

Being or being the creator because a producer can be, is.

Gill Lloyd 51:59

Can be very create a producer has now really morphed into creative producers.

Sue Dunderdale 52:03

Yes.

Gill Lloyd 52:04

Most producers are no titles in that.

Susan Croft 52:06

Way or executive producer. Well there's a kind of if levelling up it being male artistic director, woman, helpmate and supporter in administrative role.

Sue Dunderdale 52:18

How did you feel as we moved into the nineties? Did you feel that all the work that had gone on pushing at the establishment, making the alternative more visible and more attractive to audiences? Did you feel that we were on the verge of change or the change was developing? Yeah.

Gill Lloyd 52:42

I suppose a lot of the work I was still doing then was around the South African story. Yeah, and interestingly, I suppose with work coming here from South Africa was it was coming from the Market Theatre, which to the rest of the world was like the National Theatre and it was primarily run by two men, money management, Barney Simon But there were women in quite key roles artistically around a lot of the work there. People like Vanessa Cooke and Janice Honeyman, who were beginning to direct and have proper roles. And then when the shows were coming overseas, it was really about what work was available and was approved by the kind of ANC people there. And so it didn't feel that they were quite so many barriers necessarily everywhere because there was a whole fight going on against the big oppression in South Africa. And it was quite complex then as things were changing and the country was slowly changing and moving towards Mandela, coming out of prison, etc., then the focus became far more on if you're a white director or a black director and where you reposition. Yeah, and someone like Phillis Klotz, who directed Strike the Woman, she just blazed through everything. She left her white family in Cape Town and moved to Jo'burg with small and Darva, who was another director, and they set up Sibeko Arts, which was a training and theatre company in the township, working with all young people. And she's just retired now. A few weeks ago.

Susan Croft 54:15

I think there were a number of success stories, which meant we felt that things were beginning to change. So I'm thinking in particular of, say, Annie Carseldine going to Derby Playhouse with Lily, Susan Todd as associate director, where she programmed the innocent mistress by Mary PIC's first time it had been ever done since the Restoration and girl in Trains Hagen Sundays children, so women playwrights being programmed by a woman director. And I think she also did Purgatory and then started Maria Luisa Fleisher play. So I was very aware of the kind of enrichment that happened when women did take charge, and I'm not quite sure who else may be the Royal exchange came a bit later, but there's, you know, the word.

Sue Dunderdale 55:03

Royal exchange was a lot later, but.

Susan Croft 55:05

There ever a beginning to cast or theatre clued with Helena about how. And so you know there's gradual change beginning to take place when women do take over buildings. And so I felt there was a degree of optimism about that. And, you know, I know that women playwrights I worked with like April Daniels, she was beginning to make quite an established career, and playhouse creatures came through at some point. Yeah. Which is her big success. Winsome Pinnock, who had her first play with the Half Moon Young People's Theatre. And that's a very important area to mention how much writing for young people's theatre thing companies like Theatre Centre work, right? David Johnston has to be mentioned to brought in women playwrights and ended up setting up a women's company alongside the mixed company and lots of women like Lisa Evans and so on, got their careers started. There were a lot of sort of new talented women writers who were doing work there and directors as well, who then went on elsewhere. Ruth McKenzie went to Red Ladder, I think, and then she championed colour theory, who has gone on to do wonderful things, and National Theatre of of Wales. Now it's Leeds City of Culture and so forth after having run the Leicester Haymarket. So change was beginning to happen and I moved out of London to Nottingham initially and then to a manchester. And so I was getting a different perspective on it and it felt slow but that I think the Arts Council were beginning to take it more seriously as well. Jackie Kay was Equalities officer at some point. Nasim Khan, that Minority Arts Advisory Service and so the whole issue of the exclusion of women and minorities from roles and positions of power and representation on boards and work being done, all of that felt like it was bubbling up.

Sue Dunderdale 57:05

And mine was slightly different experience because I'd had such a wonderful free time at the Soho Theatre and then the Arts Council said, You've got to close, you're the highest subsidised theatre in the country per seat. So I got the job as artistic director of Greenwich and went from what had been an amazingly supportive board and freedom to do what I wanted to a very large board of mainly old white men who loathed me very quickly. And it became a soul destroying struggle. Really, I'm very frustrating because you could see the towards the end of my time there, we did an Othello with a black Iago and a black Amelia and Asian Cypriots, and we did a joint production with the Tye company called Greenwich 1789, in tribute to Ariane, a machine in 1789, which got audiences from places that Greenwich hadn't had had audiences before. But it was too vicious a struggle for me. So I went into television as if that was going to be any more welcoming to women than theatre, but that I was yet to find out. So it felt like a change of path for me. But because I

realised that I'd had a soft time at Soho, I'd had a supportive board who wanted to do that work and that my skill was not negotiating with boards.

Gill Lloyd 58:36

I think it's interesting how Rose and Lucy Lift worked through the eighties because they were bringing in quite big and unusual productions. They were negotiating with all of the theatres in London, but they were giving them something that they weren't getting from anywhere else and that Britain wasn't getting from anywhere else. And actually I think that gave them quite significant power that the rest of us in our sector didn't have. That was very much of its time. But I think that led probably to the kind of programming you now see at the Barbican and various other venues around. And that work is now happening. And if you were trying to do that now, you probably couldn't do it. But they had the power over those venues to give them this extraordinary work. Yeah, once every two years.

Susan Croft 59:26

Battersea would be another one where that would be the case. They began to position themselves as the kind of venues which did that interesting international work. Yeah,

I think another thing I'm thinking of, which started to happen in the nineties, I mean also the late eighties and so on, it's a much more visibility of Eve on Brewster with Tallulah. Yeah, So woman running that company, having set up that company, I mean the earlier black theatre companies, timber and Black Theatre Co-op had sort of been male, run it and done a few shows by women here and there. But then we felt there was much more female presence in the companies like that. Then Tamasha comes along and eventually Kali doing Asian women's work and those sort of women run Janet Steele and Christine London Smith and Sue the Butcher and so on. So there's women coming through in all those contexts as well, which I think is really important, and doing lots of plays by women.

Sue Dunderdale 1:00:25

But also offices of artists, directors of repertory theatres. We had Claire Venables at Sheffield who then went into education because whether it was from Sheffield, she went to Stratford East and that only lasted a year. And then she went to the Irish Sea as an education director and then to the Brit School. I never talked with her long enough to discover if that's what she wanted or felt she had a child to support all those things.

Susan Croft 1:00:55

That's interesting because Jenny Harris did the same thing from the Albany. Yes, the National. Yeah. Yeah. But I think they are also they make a difference in those education.

Sue Dunderdale 1:01:04

They made a difference, but it was a way also of containing them as creative beings. Let's go back to the nature of the work that we were doing and what we were seeing, because I've talked about the Soho Polly and my Freedom, the but it was one of the most joyous and exciting times of my directing life because I was free to do whatever play that I wanted. And in that time we did mainly all working class writers at Soho Theatre. It was the interest of both myself and Brian Stern, my associate director. I forged working relationships with I Sharif, but also with Melissa murray, who I'd worked with before. But the first play of hers I did The Coming Apart was just an extraordinary play set in Berlin during the time of the Baader-Meinhof group with the police searches of apartment blocks coming in. And it was an extraordinary play dealing with all the issues that were going on then to do with underground fighting, to do with terrorism, to do with the role of women, the impact of the war and so on. And Julia Kearsley, who was explored the minutiae of family life and its impact on women trying to get away from it. For me, it was a real time of artistic freedom because if we had a full house, which was 50 people, it made not that much difference financially to us. Between that and eight people. Financially, we had that freedom and it was helped by the Arts Council money we had. But also in that period I managed to persuade Westminster Council to match our Arts Council grant. So for a period of three or four years we could do those seven or eight productions a year all funded, which was fantastic. So that was my glorious time in the eighties for you, while yours, I should imagine, was the South Africa connection.

Gill Lloyd 1:03:09

Well, it was the end of the eighties. In 88 and 89, the ANC decided they wanted to do a huge cultural festival in London called Zaba Plaza. And myself and my friend Linda Bernard were called in to produce it. So we had the head of the ANC culture working in the arts. I'd been office for some months and in the end we brought over 120 young people from all across the arts. There were writers, poets, musicians, theatre groups, they did shows and we had what was then the Central Arts Centre, and we had the ICA and Riverside and then we had the Shadwell Education Centre. So everyone had an education while they were here and they went to classes all day and this was sort of in the height of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. So we had people from the Africa Centre who came and did lots of the teaching. We did some training about HIV prevention and we handed out bags of condoms to everybody. Several of them came back to us about four days later asking for another

supply. They were having a good time, but it was just fascinating to see that number of people and nowadays to see some of them as ministers in government.

Susan Croft 1:04:27

Yeah, well, I suppose mine is new Playwrights Trust in Second Wave, Young Women, Playwrights Festival and so on, and that's incredibly important. A new work bubbling up and actually making that happen. So there were a lot of related projects. I mean, I got a lot of support from the Half Moon Young People's Theatre specifically. They did win some Pinnock's first play, *The Wind of Change*. They put on Angela Carter's *Van Perella*. They did some really interesting work and they created a space where we could workshop plays. So I did Penny O'Connor *Stick Volley*, *Spike*, April Angela's play *Breathless*, which was her first piece that then went on to jointly win Second Wave Young Women's Playwrights Festival, and that was down in Deptford, and there were a lot of other young women, young black women in particular locally, because we were working in Deptford with the local communities, encouraging women to think that they could write, they could put their experiences on stage, and that really felt like it was transforming things and you'd get, you know, amazing audience reactions. And, you know, I was pleased that women were beginning to emerge who were focused on the larger spaces, but the alternative was alternative in that it was trying to do something different, reach people in different ways, go out to different audiences, be accessible to different audiences, to work for those different audiences and with them and tell different stories. And and that really felt so exciting that it was creating change. You know, I wanted to see women's stories everywhere historically and contemporary coming from all sorts of directions and and also be part of that. So I remember one of my really exciting experiences was going to see a mouth full of birds. I think David Lunn co-wrote it with with Carol Churchill, but also working with Second Strike dancers. And you'd have two male dancers. They're both wearing skirts and they're both indeterminate gender. And that was so exciting to see that kind of work and then work like *Siren*, who were lesbian, feminist, banned and speaking really powerfully, and then breaking up the action with these songs very much from that subject position. And you come to, Wow, this is all possible. And, you know, we are just beginning to break out of our ways.

Gill Lloyd 1:06:39

And Carol's.

Susan Croft 1:06:39

Burying the parallels. Yeah.

Sue Dunderdale 1:06:41

Stunning. So coming some company.

Gill Lloyd 1:06:44

Yeah.

Susan Croft 1:06:45

So many. When I went to count them in, when I first set up unfinished histories, there were about 80 women's theatre companies that we started between the first one, which would have been the Women's Theatre Festival in 1973. And then after that you're just appearing all over the place, not because the Arts Council would necessarily fund them, but because women in the business wanted to make work, you know, whether it was about spare tyre exploring body image, whether it's cutting stunts, as you say, who, you know, working with female grotesquerie, where you're not having to conform to the stereotypical images of what women are supposed to look like on stage. So it's everything's being thrown into question. And it was enormously exciting to be around that work.

Andrew Muir 1:07:36

Thank you to Susan Dunderdale, Susan Croft and Jill Lloyd for that tour of the women's theatre scene in the 1980s. Next time on Activism in the Eighties how an epic Strike by some Extraordinary women inspired an adventurous woman playwright to write a thrilling stage production.

Susan Croft 1:07:53

To have the real strikers meet the people playing them. It was very special and their reaction and also actually other people involved in activism who had come and seen the show and been moved by it and felt that it was authentic. I was like, Whoa, that's who I care about.

Andrew Muir 1:08:10

Listen to the final episode of activism in the eighties now, wherever you get your podcasts. Activism in the Eighties is a podcast series recorded in response to the play Strike, written by Tracy Ryan and produced by Ardent Theatre Company at the Southwark Playhouse London in April 2023. This series has been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and was produced by Creative Kin.