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Introduction to "A Forum on Directing and Choreography: Sources by Leading Women"

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A FORUM ON TRAINING IN DIRECTING AND CHOREOGRAPHY: SOURCES FROM LEADING WOMEN

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

In the spirit of the SDC Statement on Diversity and Inclusion, for this issue of the Journal containing several pieces about women leading, we initiated a forum similar to the one on the relationship between the academy and the profession which introduced the new Peer-Reviewed Section last summer. We invited members of our board and others teaching in various types of institutions around the country to write about texts that they use in their classes, sources by or about women directors and choreographers.

In an initial brainstorming meeting, a member of the board queried: "Are there many texts by women about directing?" Beyond the several books by **Anne Bogart**, which have become standards in the field alongside **Peter Brook** and **William Ball**, others do not as readily come to mind. Additionally, books compiling information about directors and directing have been skewed for decades, often with fewer than twenty-five percent of their entries based upon women. In response to this imbalance, we created a nonexclusive, complementary list of sources by and about women directors and choreographers, primarily composed of books and scholarly journals. Because of their influence on practitioners, we included a handful of texts by feminist theorists in performance as well, though we could only print a few of many in this substantial area of scholarship. Likewise, we note that women of color and trans women working in the two fields are even less fairly represented in print, and women working in fields such as children's theatre and devising deserve more thorough coverage than we are able to offer here. Please see the note at the end of the list on page 57 to send us sources we have missed on this preliminary list, which will be maintained and updated periodically at sdcweb.org/TheSourceList.

work of Adolphe Appia. Students find these techniques accessible and practical. Littlewood also introduced numerous innovations of process. She used improvisation extensively and practiced group devising before it had been named as such. Theatre Workshop approached the classics without a shred of reverence, framing them not as the heritage of the ruling class, but as a tool of its demise. Her optimism about the potential of theatre to transform communities is inspiring. For many years Theatre Workshop maintained its home in London's hardscrabble East End and actively nurtured ties to local residents.

Numerous recent studies provide entree to Littlewood's working methods and adapt easily to the requirements of the studio. My primary text is Nadine Holdsworth's *Joan Littlewood*, a short book in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series. Holdsworth includes a biographical overview, a substantial introduction to Littlewood's preferred techniques and rehearsal practices, a descriptive analysis of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, and a concluding section with practical exercises that especially foreground Littlewood's adaptation of Laban's theory of effort qualities to the theatre.

I also use selections from Holdsworth's longer study *Joan Littlewood's Theatre* and Robert Leach's *Theatre Workshop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*. If time permits, Holdsworth's brief biography can be supplemented with excerpts from Littlewood's autobiography *Joan's Book: Joan Littlewood's Peculiar History as She Tells It* and Peter Rankin's *Joan Littlewood, Dreams and Realities: The Official Biography*.

Within my class, students create small-scale *études* and larger-scale scene projects rooted in a play directed by each director we study. For many years we worked on *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, but I never found a satisfactory way to fit this sprawling work into the limits of a classroom setting. I still require students to read it, but it is no longer our primary text. Rather, I have turned to the plays of Ben Jonson. Jonson was Littlewood's favorite playwright, and she is widely regarded as the preeminent Jonson interpreter of the modern era. His scabrous comedies provide students manifold opportunity to enlist Littlewood's exacting craft and obstreperous spirit as a prod to their own imaginations.

I remember as a graduate student in directing that as much as I loved my experience at the University of California at San Diego (and I did), I sometimes felt left adrift by the paucity of historical perspective explicitly undergirding my training. One way to provide students a sense of the ground they stand on is to root



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most generative figures my students and I study is the mid-century English director Joan Littlewood. As most readers of this journal will know, Littlewood was a working class theatre artist from London whose vital work unfolded across the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Her artistic leadership of her company, Theatre Workshop, vaulted it into one of the preeminent ensembles of Europe. Theatre Workshop alternated between boundary breaking productions of the classics and contemporary plays about working class life. The productions often boasted a rambunctious energy drawn in good measure from the entertainments of the English music hall. The company's signature production was *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, a collectively created Pierrot show excavating the traumatic legacy of World War I in vignettes built around the popular music of the era.

Littlewood is an especially useful figure through whom to introduce students to the craft, art, and social task of directing plays. She synthesizes several prominent strands of European performance history. Rooted in Stanislavski's model of character objectives, she engages the movement theories of Rudolph Laban to amplify and nuance the actor's embodiment of them. Her scenography, developed especially with the designer John Bury, draws inspiration from the magisterial

For the last several years, I have taught directing through the study of influential figures in the history of the art form. In a class called Major Directors: Theory and Practice, I adapt the perspectives and practices of historically significant theatre directors to the needs of the contemporary rehearsal hall. The course leavens the usual pragmatic concerns of the studio with material often relegated to theatre history classrooms. Among the