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THE POLITICS OF TEA AND THEATRE:  
HOW WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE GROUPS USED  
TEA AND THEATRE TO INFLUENCE  
WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN  
TO BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Lisa M. Kelly entitled “The Politics of Tea and Theatre: How Women’s Suffrage Groups Used Tea and Theatre to Influence Working and Middle Class Women to Become Politically Active” has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of M.F.A. in Theatre Pedagogy

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.F.A in  
Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### **THE POLITICS OF TEA AND THEATRE: HOW WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE GROUPS USED TEA AND THEATRE TO INFLUENCE WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN TO BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE**

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.F.A. at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

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Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the members of the woman's suffrage movement in the United States and Britain looked to soften their hard masculine image given to them by the press and to increase participation in the cause. They found that by including theatrical performances and benefits at meetings, and hosting tea socials afterwards, they could motivate many women to join without alienating or threatening men. This study looks at how tea socials and theatrical performances were used subversively to recruit new members, to debate ideas, and to disseminate information about the cause. Playwrights wrote plays that examined the questions and issues

surrounding this movement, and upstart, female-operated theatre groups and social clubs presented these plays to the public, allowing the debate to reach a wider audience.

Actresses themselves joined clubs to increase their presence in society, to help out other actresses, and to find political agency.

## Introduction

Relying on pageantry to get their points across, the leaders of the movement...accurately gauged the tenor of the times in adapting 'theatrical methods' to a political cause. (Corbett 155)

The leaders that Mary Jean Corbett is referring to here are the leaders of the American and British women's suffrage organizations in the early years of the twentieth century. These women understood that in order to gain female emancipation and suffrage, widespread support would be needed from both men and women across all social and economic classes. Political rallies and meetings, as well as hunger strikes, economic product strikes, imprisonments, and riots attracted a lot of press attention, and garnered some support, but also created enemies and scared off a lot of would-be supporters who did not want to descend to violence, or had too much at stake to join a politically dissident and volatile group.

Reputations of radical suffragettes (those that resorted to violence and extra-legal means to fight for the vote) and even those of the more conservative suffragists (the majority of enfranchisement supporters who worked within legal means to achieve political agency) had been hurt by political leaders wanting to maintain the status quo power structure and by press agents who stereotyped all suffrage supporters as masculine "new women" who were unfeminine, radical, over educated, and dangerous. Supporters



of women's rights needed to find a way to explain their views, create constructive debate, and demonstrate that women could be both politically aware and active, and yet still traditionally feminine. Suffrage leaders wanted to invite all women to join their cause, which meant not alienating either the more radical working class agitators, or the wealthier middle and upper classes who could lead to the financial success of their endeavors. They also needed to educate supportive males about their goals and how the vote for women could benefit both genders. Activism worked in the short-term, but was also alienating and dangerous. The movement needed something that could reach mass audiences, and teach people without being overly didactic. Most of all, the movement needed to be a true woman's movement, of, by, and for women. They could borrow from male political tactics, but blindly copying men would actually work against their ideals. If women simply became masculine, they would lose the subtle, indirect influences they had over men, and would become dangerous antagonists instead of potential equal partners. According to Judith Stephens, women's rights advocates quickly learned to campaign on a platform of how femininity could benefit public affairs. Female leaders "argued that women could weed out corruption and ultimately reform society if given the chance to extend their housecleaning and sanctifying talents into the public arena" (Stephens 284). The traditional "powers" of women in the home could be extended to the public sphere and women could become the agents for moral political reform.

As I began my research into why and how women became politically active in the suffrage movement, I felt that theatre had to be somehow involved. I knew that many well-known actresses had become suffragists, and lobbied extensively for the cause as they

traveled around the United States and England. I also knew that theatre was a unique profession in which women already shared some equality with their male colleagues. Female theatre artists and their male colleagues earned essentially equal wages in many companies. According to Michael Booth, “An actress did not compete with an actor for the same job, so was no threat to him economically...A woman could thus receive the theatrical wage appropriate to her ability without depressing the wage scale for men” (Booth 112). Women could also rise to stardom where they could demand increased wages and even percentages of box office earnings. Booth also mentions that actresses at the top of their profession might earn just as much or more than male colleagues, and might employ males as managers”(Booth 112-113). In addition to economic parity, actresses also knew how to captivate crowds and motivate audiences to experience various emotions. They were articulate and self-possessed, and obviously were good public speakers. Offstage, they were much more independent than most women who lived under the watchful eyes of fathers and husbands. The fact that they worked in a profession outside the home placed them in the public male world instead of the private female world. Women could even rise to the ranks of theatre managers and producers; sometimes with male partners, sometimes on their own. Madame Vestris, Marie Wilton, Ada Swansborough, Lily Langtry, and Sarah Thorne are all examples of female theatrical managers who ran successful companies and competed favorably with men. These abilities unique to female performers combined to create a scenario where it seems possible, if not inevitable, that female theater practitioners would become active in the suffrage movement. They were working women, who would recognize the benefits of

having governmental representation, and they possessed the skills to promote a cause in which they believed. In other words, there had to be some links between suffrage activism and the theatre world.

Initially I intended to look closely at the way working class actresses became politically active in the suffrage movement. I wanted to find and bring to general notice those women who rose from working class acting backgrounds to achieve fame, or at least leadership roles in the myriad of suffrage organizations that existed. This is still my lofty goal, but I realized that I would first need to learn a lot more about the context of the women's suffrage movement, and the lives of actresses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I want to study both American and British theatre and suffrage movements, to see if there are links between the two, and to see how organizations in both countries worked together. I feel again that touring actresses, with knowledge of the political and social environments in both countries, were able to contribute to the communication between various groups on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Every little bit of information I dig up leads to more questions, more information that I need to contextualize my research.

I have decided that for the purpose of this thesis, instead of providing answers that I am not ready to give, and analyzing information that has really just begun to present itself to me, I will lay out a lot of ideas, questions really. I am using the framework of the feminizing effects of tea socials and theatre on the suffrage movement. Tea and theatre were instrumental in effecting political change and getting women the vote. The more I read, the more I discover how these two events were so often linked. For instance, most

every theatrical benefit performance for the suffrage cause was followed by a tea, in which the female attendees would gather to discuss the production they had just seen, and often where wealthy patrons were asked to contribute to the cause, to become financial patrons of the suffrage movement. Many tea events held by suffrage groups likewise would have, as their entertainment, a reading of a popular suffrage play, or at least dramatic poems and monologues by local or famous actresses. These entertainments increased attendance at suffrage teas and meetings, and emotionally motivated the attendees to political action.

The first chapter of this thesis lays out a brief history of the social and political clubs for actresses in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I focus on the Twelfth Night Club, the Professional Women's League, and the Gamut Club, as they were the most long-lasting and most successful clubs during this time. These clubs were meeting places for actresses, and safe havens for actresses to form bonds, mentor younger women, and provide a network of support for the challenges of living in this difficult career. Most every actress was a member of at least one of these clubs. Only the Gamut Club became overtly political, but as membership overlapped, women in all clubs became both politically and socially aware. All of the clubs were involved with providing social welfare for group members and other actresses in need. All worked tirelessly to improve the daily lives of actresses. The formula of alternating between social meetings, educational meetings, and performance meetings, with special occasion parties and events that was so successful for these clubs was quickly co-opted by the wider suffrage movement. By around 1900, many non-theatrical suffrage clubs were also including readings of suffrage plays, skits, and poems as part of their meetings, and were also

alternating between business planning meetings, and social outlet meetings in which members could form lasting friendship bonds, which actually made for stronger, more connected suffrage supporters.

The second chapter is a discussion of how theatre was used by suffrage organizations to recruit, motivate, and educate supporters and non-supporters about the ideas and interests of the suffrage movement. I discuss the recruitment and retention strategies that suffrage organizations used to encourage both wealthy and working class women to join their ranks. There were hundreds of suffrage benefit performances held in New York between 1880 and 1920. In this chapter I highlight a few of the most successful and far-reaching performances. These were occasions where actresses joined forces with overtly political suffrage organizations such as the Women's Political Union and the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage to stage events that would attract women from across the social and economic strata of New York society. At the turn of the century, theatre had become an acceptable venue for middle and upper class society. Women could even attend legitimate theatre (not dancing halls, vaudeville, or burlesque) with other women, or on their own, especially for matinee performances. I use audience reception theory in this chapter to look at how theatre had become, in many ways, a feminized sphere where women could both participate and observe without transgressing moral or political boundaries. The popular theatre of the time was realistic, "cup and saucer" drama, which presented middle and upper class characters in "slice of life" theatre. This was a non-threatening genre which men could accept and allow their daughters and wives to attend without risk. Activist playwrights quickly learned that they could easily

subvert this genre by presenting political messages coded in the society drama framework or by inserting “new women” and suffrage supporters into the framework of a realistic drama.

The next chapter is a discussion of two such playwrights, Elizabeth Robins and George Bernard Shaw, and two plays that made their work famous and controversial. I look at Robins’ *Votes for Women!* and Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* which both subvert the classic drawing room comedy genre, by inserting strong “new women” characters and either subtle or overt suffrage themes and ideas. This chapter also looks at suffrage groups and events occurring in England at the same time as the clubs and benefit performances were occurring in the United States. This chapter introduces the comparative nature of my research. As this project grows, I will draw connections between the activism in both countries, and the players who were uniquely situated to take part in the organizations in both countries at the same time. This chapter shows on a case study basis how the women’s movement was forming in England, and demonstrates the more activist stance that English suffragists seemed to be promoting. In general British suffrage activism was more radical, violent, and extreme than the activism occurring in the United States. The text of *Votes for Women*, for instance, alludes to hunger strikes and violent uprisings that were unique to the British suffrage culture. The British theatrical clubs were likewise more overtly politically active than even the Gamut Club in the United States. They were formed solely to promote women’s emancipation and suffrage, and most of their work, at least prior to the advent of World War I was in support of this cause.

The final chapter of the thesis returns to the theme of recruitment, retention, and activism among women's groups. This time, I look at how the tea social, as both a part of the suffrage theatrical benefit, and as a stand alone venture, also served as a recruitment method for activists. The serving of tea has been a part of the female sphere in Europe and the United States for centuries. Women came together over a seemingly innocuous cup of tea. Once gathered, however, the astute suffrage recruiter could use this meeting time to brook suffrage ideas, create a sympathetic audience, and explain why suffrage is so important for women. Just as theatre had become a feminized institution, tea too was seen by all as a female social event, which was non-threatening, and even encouraged by men. Allowing women to gather to discuss female issues and to form relationships was healthy, and safe. Women were still in the private sphere and learning how to properly serve tea added to the Victorian "cult of domesticity." This representation of femininity, however, was also empowering to women, and allowed ideas to formulate, events to be planned, and opened up communication between women with both the time and money to participate actively in the cause. In this chapter I look at theories of femininity in order to discuss how and why tea, and female social gathering in general, was both a bonding opportunity and an educational and activist opportunity at the same time. These events were held openly, under the noses of men, yet were used to subvert the feminine tradition at the same time, and to share news and vital information used to keep suffrage supporters communicating and informed. When combined, tea and theatre were overtly subversive, yet completely traditional; social yet educational and informative; activist and even didactic yet entertaining; and completely feminine yet completely empowering.

## CHAPTER 1: Tea as a Subversive Tradition

“From now on the league is going to beguile its members and visitors with tea, have a reception committee to meet all strangers, make them feel at home, and help convert the anti-suffragist visitors” (NY Times 7, May 1909). Such was the determination of the New York Equal Suffrage League in 1909 to find a way to make potential recruits to the suffrage cause more comfortable, and to modify the suffrage woman’s reputation among all of New York society. Tea, and femininity, was the answer. The serving of tea has traditionally been a mainstay of the feminine sphere. In both eastern and western cultures, women historically have served tea to men and other women in order to demonstrate their hostess and guest welcoming abilities. In upper and middle class British and American society, tea is somewhat symbolic of the leisure classes. By the nineteenth century, afternoon teas were an occasion to visit with friends and family, and to take a break from daily activities.

In the early twentieth century, the stereotype of the “New Woman” created a barrier for women who wanted both emancipation, and the ability to be feminine. Although the term was apparently coined by a female writer, Sarah Grand, in 1894 in an article entitled, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” the term quickly took on negative connotations and was usurped by men wanting to denigrate the emancipated woman idea. According to Jean Chothia, New Women were considered by the male press as



“desexed...the unwomanly, the unsexed females...the whole army of unprepossessing cranks in petticoats...educated and muck ferreting dogs...effeminate men and male women” (Chothia ix). Men, and many women themselves, felt that too much access to education and political activity would make women become unfeminine; unwilling to take care of domestic duties or raise children properly. If everyone was in the public sphere, in other words, who would take care of the private sphere? Magazines such as *Punch*, in London, satirized the New Woman as it, according to Chothia, “both reflected and considerably shaped the habit of addressing female emancipation and educational success as subjects for glorious mirth” (Chothia x). Women’s suffrage groups, realizing that their reputations had been hurt somewhat by the “New Woman” image of the masculinized female, began to reappropriate the tea ceremony to make their members seem more feminine, more inviting, and not as politically active or subversive. Serving tea at a meeting, for instance, made the event seem more like a female social gathering instead of a political rally. Men could look upon these tea socials as non-threatening female gatherings. Other women also saw tea socials as inviting and socially acceptable. Using the guise of tea and discussion, suffrage groups could attract a wider membership, especially among the upper classes, and could decrease male antagonism, since a tea social was simply a female social event, not a political stance. In this way the suffrage groups were able to continue their subversive goals of gaining suffrage and equality for women by working from inside the traditional system. The serving of tea consequently increased the legitimacy of female suffrage organizations and allowed them to capitalize on the

acceptable social images of the feminine woman instead of the subversive New Woman who was seen as dangerous to traditional society.

Suffrage groups had already appropriated theatre and speechmaking as tactics to disseminate information to a wider audience. Serving tea after a theatrical benefit or series of speeches further legitimized these events, and tapped into the upper class social traditions. Wealthy female supporters could hold a tea social at their homes or at a local restaurant or club after a benefit performance. This tea event would increase the attendance of other socialites, and would allow additional opportunities to spread the suffrage message in an acceptable environment. According to suffrage supporter, Mrs. Frederick Nathan, tea was considered the best way to encourage anti-suffragists to join the cause. “Get all the anti-suffragists in that you can and give them tea...and when they are beginning to feel warm and comfortable it will be no trouble at all to convert them” (NY Times 7 May 1905).

One of the first hurdles suffragist groups had to overcome when attempting to recruit wealthier women, and non-supportive women in general, was breaking down the relations seen between the majority of suffrage activists and the minority numbers of radical suffragette groups that used violence to achieve their goals. According to a 1909 *New York Times* article about women organizing for the cause while suffrage gained popularity in the United States, a stark distinction was drawn between American and mainstream British suffrage, and the more radical British version:

Suffragette is the name applied to the radical wing of the party in England which has stirred up such a rumpus in the past few years. Nearly all American women

believe either that the time has not come to America for such methods, or that it will never come. (NY Times 7 Nov 1909)

American suffrage groups in particular chose to work from within the current political system, and to use non-threatening options whenever possible to achieve their goals. This is not to say that there were not radical suffragettes in America, or that violence never occurred during the fight for suffrage. Most mainstream suffrage groups simply attempted to avoid violence in order to gain respect from the men they needed to win over. Women had long held an indirect influence over the political lives of men which they did not want to give up. Likewise, femininity was still important and valued by most women.

According to Judith Stephens, “The feminist tradition inherited by leaders of the Progressive era was a tradition marked by ties to religion, family, and a sense of moral duty” (Stephens 284). Women still wanted to be seen as women and still, as Stephens says, “embraced the moral hegemony nineteenth-century ideology bestowed upon middle-class women” (284). This ideology had created essentially separate spheres of influence for women and men, relegating women to the domestic, private sphere and giving men the more powerful public sphere. Women, however, had embraced this separation, and especially the power it had given them. Women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century society had the sanctifying power of morality. Because the “cult of domesticity” decreed that women should be the keepers of morality in the home, the rearers of both male and female children, and the organizers of the respectable home, women had a very important power over men that could be targeted and used to promote suffrage ideas.

Many suffrage leaders picked up the rhetoric of women’s domestic powers when they tried

to recruit women to their cause. Jane Addams, for instance encouraged women to play a role in municipal government by comparing it to “housekeeping on a large scale.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman told women to assume their duties as “mothers of the world.” Even advocates of women’s education used this argument. Alice Freeman Palmer and M. Carey Thomas said that women should be educated because their education would “serve the best interests of the family” (qtd in Stephens 285).

These arguments of why women should have more equality and the right to participate in the political process because of their unique position in society were, ultimately, the most effective arguments for women’s suffrage. There was little men in power could say to attack these arguments, since it was their hegemonic power structure that had created both the separate spheres, and the sanctifying power of women as upholders of morality. Women had simply learned to flip the argument that they should stay hidden and private, to make it seem as though it was the moral duty of women to vote and participate in politics to save brutish men from themselves. Campaigning on a platform of feminine values created a niche for women’s involvement in politics that was difficult to refute. All women had to do was prove that they would still be feminine, and that traditional women’s duties would still be upheld. One woman from Colorado, the second state in the union to grant suffrage to women in 1893, understood this and campaigned for nation-wide suffrage by saying:

I have voted for ten years in Colorado. Do I look as if it had destroyed my home?...I would be willing for any man to come out and inspect the homes of the

women in my State. I don't think they would look any different to him than the homes he sees in New York or Maryland. (NY Times 7 Nov. 1909)

She knew from experience that having the vote in her state had not made women leave the home behind completely, or stop doing all of the things that made them feminine. It simply gave the women of Colorado some political agency and the ability to vote for their own interests directly, instead of being forced to vote indirectly through the men in their lives. Suffrage organizations, understanding the need to uphold traditional female values as they worked to recruit women from all strata of society, turned to tea socials as one of the primary methods of recruiting new women, disseminating information, and creating social bonds among women that would lead to both emotional and political motivation to activism.

Tea socials, especially when paired with a theatrical performance or reading, were excellent venues for recruiting new women to the suffrage cause. First, they were seen as socially safe, an innocuous cup of tea with friends could hardly be subversive or unfeminine. Women served and drank tea daily. Upper class women especially were expected to be well versed in the protocol for serving tea to friends and family. This was, in fact, one of the primary social events during the day for socialite women. At a suffrage event, anti-suffragists could be invited in for the opportunity for tea and camaraderie with other women. Once inside the meeting, having tea would make a wary woman more comfortable, and more receptive to new ideas. Since tea was such a pervasive part of society, even those that did not actually like the taste of it understood the social exigency of drinking it. According to a *NY Times* article about including tea as a suffrage

recruitment tool, “To make the tea bait more attractive, the league has pretty young girl suffragists to pass it around. There are many of the suffragists who do not care for tea, but they take it on principle” (NY Times 7 May, 1909). Essentially, the social aspects of serving tea were used as bait to bring new women into meetings and to make them feel more comfortable and a part of the group. This would then, theoretically and practically, make these newcomers more receptive to listen to the supporters and to potentially join the cause.

Similarly, tea socials were used to help encourage wealthy women to choose to financially back the suffrage cause. Once again, a tea social advertised and attended by socially prominent women would become an important social event that a wealthy woman would not want to miss. Once the social call brought in potential recruits, suffragist leaders could then take the floor and make speeches to motivate the wealthy to donate money and time to the cause. It was at one such tea event in 1914, for instance, that an entirely new suffrage organization was created. According to the *NY Times*, “At this reception it was decided to form a new suffrage club of the club women in New York who are not affiliated with one of the suffrage organizations in the city” (NY Times 1 Mar. 1914). It was over tea that this group of women, who had previously been either averse or apathetic to the suffrage movement, decided to join the ranks of those working for the cause. Another star-studded tea event demonstrates the subtle and not so subtle influences of a suffrage tea. This tea followed a series of performances by virtually every popular actress and many actors in New York. The theatrical event raised an enormous amount of money for suffrage, and was incredibly motivating. At a tea for the wealthy attendees

afterwards, there were “yellow flowers on every table, and in one corner was a suffrage table with two big yellow Jack Horner pies, christened birthday cakes for the occasion, and pretty suffrage trinkets in the same color” (NY Times 17 Feb. 1914). Using suffrage colors and ‘trinkets’ as decorations ensured that the women present would continue to keep the cause in mind as they discussed the performance over tea.

Once the promise of tea brought both current supporters and potential supporters in the door, it became the job of the organizers of these events to disseminate information and create motivation among the attendees to agitate for the cause. In many cases, actresses and playwrights became necessary partners in the suffrage cause, because their work was used to motivate new recruits and share information about suffrage. Many suffrage teas and social events included readings of suffrage plays such as Elizabeth Robins’ *Votes for Women*, or Christopher St. John’s *How the Vote Was Won*. Actresses often participated by reading from these and other plays, or presenting monologues or dialogues written especially for an event. These readings and performances were especially motivating, and often worked more on the emotions of those present than the requisite suffrage speech or call to action. Tea socials also often followed benefit theatrical performances held by suffrage groups. These performances could be used as springboards to start discussion of ideas presented in the play.

The main reason why tea socials worked as a subversive tradition is that they brought women together and allowed for female bonding to occur in a safe environment. Women gathered to support each other, and to make social connections. Actresses for instance, formed clubs just for that reason, to counteract the effects of isolation and

insecurity they faced in their daily lives. Ada Patterson, in a *Theatre Magazine* article about women's theatrical clubs, discusses the homey atmosphere of the Charlotte Cushman Club in Philadelphia where members might "brew their tea of an afternoon" and where there are "Friday afternoon teas, which famous players who chance to be visiting the city honor with their presence" (*Theatre Magazine* XX). This club, and the many others like it, created an environment where women could relax and escape from hectic lives. Clubs for men often centered around drinking alcohol in order to escape the pressures of daily life. Women's clubs, much more carefully scrutinized, often banned alcohol, at least publicly. Tea became an acceptable substitute. It may not have the numbing or inhibition lifting effects of alcohol, but tea, like alcohol, is more of a social institution than a simple beverage. It also has restorative, and relaxation elements that make it so popular. Women came together over tea, and bonds were created that allowed the channels of communication to open so women could become educated about the platform of suffrage, and how it applied to and would affect the lives of all women.

Working actresses, and other professional women, were among the first to realize the necessity of having political agency, as their quality of life often directly depended on government action in taxation, labor laws, union laws, and the like. These women were therefore often on the front lines of suffrage agitation. The need for suffrage affected all women, however, working and not, rich and poor. Women had to fight an uphill battle to get the attention of politicians, and the support of the men in charge of public society. The demands for the vote, for increased access to education, to work freely outside the home all required a considerable change in the status quo of society, and a freeing of the social



restrictions placed upon women throughout history. In the forty year period between 1880 and 1920, more significant progress was made towards the emancipation and enfranchisement of women in the United States and Great Britain than in any other single period prior to the 1960s. It was through the hard work and dedication of numerous women from all social and economic classes that understood the need to become full fledged citizens in order to achieve any type of real equality with men that suffrage was fought for and attained. Women worked from both within the current political system and without, using both traditional political methods such as petitions, lobbying, and holding teas and theatrical benefits and subversive methods of violence, hunger strikes, and rioting to achieve their goals. Ultimately it was the ability of women to come together, to bond over an important issue that made the movement so successful.

In the next chapter I will look at another tool the suffrage movement used to recruit and retain members, the use of entertainment, and theatre in particular at meetings. As I have discussed, many teas were held after suffrage related theatre productions so women could discuss ideas presented. Likewise, many theatrical benefits enticed socialite women to attend by luring them with a promised tea. Suffrage groups quickly learned that the theatrical world could be a strong ally due to the large number of professional working women involved, the emotions that theatre can pull from potential supporters, and the entertainment value that gets both women and men in the door.

## CHAPTER 2: Theatre as a Suffrage Recruitment Tool

The original is one of the most pungent, one of the most daring dramas that have [sic] ever been written, but the version used...last spring...is a marked concession to present-day standards of propriety and dramatic art. The object of the performance was not to reproduce Greek drama or to familiarize a modern audience with its peculiarities and beauties, but to make propaganda for Votes for Women. (TM XVII)

So states a *Theatre Magazine* review of the 1913 production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* performed at the Maxine Elliott Theatre by the Women's Political Union. This production was highly political, and used the vehicle of Aristophanes' play about women who abstained from love, to promote the cause of women's suffrage to a wider audience. It was popular because, though it was meant as a suffrage propaganda play, it actually spoke to both suffrage supporters, and anti-suffrage women. Anti-suffrage women, saw how the Greek women used 'indirect influence' to get the men of Athens to stop a war they did not support. These women said the play demonstrated how indirect influence could work well for women. What they did not yet understand was that idea actually played into the hands of suffrage supporters, who were beginning to use the idea of women's moral superiority as evidence of the need to give women political agency. Suffrage supporters pointed out the 'unwomanly behavior' shown by some of the Athenian

women and explained to men how it would simply be easier to keep the women at home and keep public and private spheres separate by simply giving women the vote. The production by the WPU demonstrates how suffrage supporters used theatre to recruit both women and men to their cause, and to debate the anti-suffrage argument without appearing to be unfeminine or anti-domestic.

Theatre in general was already becoming a rallying point for the women's suffrage supporters. By the turn of the nineteenth century, theatre had become an extension of the women's sphere. It was widely admitted that the "matinee girl" and her "matinee idol" actor, terms that had come into existence just after the Civil War<sup>1</sup>, had made theatre a widely accepted form of entertainment for middle and upper class women. Theatres began catering to this audience in the late nineteenth century by cleaning up, creating more comfortable seating, and banning alcohol and the attendance of prostitutes. According to Archie Bell in a 1907 *Theatre Magazine* article, women had "lifted [theatre] to its rightful place and established or re-established acting as an art...She cleansed and purged it of its filth...and cast her own fortune with it" (TM VII). Bell goes on to explain that managers and producers consider their female audiences first when choosing seasons and that men will "go because she is there or to act as her escort" (TM VII). Theatre had become the domain of women, and therefore it was a logical recruitment and distribution ground for suffrage information. Now that it was safe for women to attend, producers realized the financial possibilities in seasons, or at least matinee performances, geared to the interests

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to Albert Auster's dissertation, *Chambers of Diamonds and Delight: Actresses, Suffragists, and Feminists in the American Theatre, 1890-1920*, for a discussion of the effects of the matinee girl and the matinee idol on American theatre.

and empowerment of women. Scores of matinee performances, and evening performances of plays about “new women” or about the benefits of women’s suffrage began appearing in playbills all over the country. According to Albert Auster, “the growth of the theatre in America and its simultaneous use for educational and reform purposes coincided with the revival of the women’s movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (Auster Chambers 8). Auster goes on to define the “new woman” as an early twentieth century phenomenon. “The ‘New Woman,’ as she was referred to in this period, was a product of increased higher education, expanded leisure, and the growth of women in the work force. A major result of these changes was the resurgence of the women’s suffrage movement” (Auster Chambers 8). Another *Theatre Magazine* article in 1911 also made the connection between the power that women had at the theatre, and the benefit of empowering women through theatre: “The encouragement of women...for just as distinctly as we are the bearers of babes are we the mainstays of the theatre. Most men don’t really care for the theatre. They are only made to believe they do, by the women” (TM XIII). Women were clearly realizing by 1911 the power they yielded over season selection and the popular success of plays. Producers and managers began seeking out plays that spoke to women or addressed their interests and needs.

Not only were the numbers of women increasing in the audiences of playhouses, but actresses themselves demonstrated a level of equality with their male cohorts that virtually did not exist elsewhere in the professional world. An 1897 editorial in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, entitled “Woman and the Stage,” states:

One phase of the question as to women and the stage will bear repeated reference and reiterated declaration. While women win distinction as befits their ability in literature; while a few of the gentler sex succeed...in the journalism of the day; while occasionally the eye is saluted by the shingle of a woman M.D. whose practice necessarily must be special, and while the occasional woman not only creates a sensation for the public but also amazes her furtively glancing colleagues at bench and bar as a lawyer, the theatre alone of all the institutions of civilization offers to her sisters a field in which they do stand absolutely on an equality with men. (Dramatic Mirror 12)

Though the editorial writer does not define “absolute equality” it is true that actresses of that time had substantive equality in economic opportunities and enjoyed social and sexual independence of which most women could not dream<sup>2</sup>. This equality gave actresses the opportunity to help lead the struggle for emancipation for all women, and for the enfranchisement of women. Actresses were both symbols of what independent women could achieve, and actual spokespeople for the suffrage cause. Their training in charm, elocution, public speaking, and connecting with audiences made them perfect candidates for leadership positions in suffrage groups, or as guest lecturers and performers for suffrage meetings. Actresses were generally charming, beautiful women, who could also dispel the unflattering stereotypes of the “new women.” Sheila Stowell describes the stereotypical “new women” and suffrage supporters as, ‘unnatural’ masculinized women

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<sup>2</sup> See Albert Auster, *Actresses and Suffragists, Women in American Theatre, 1890-1920*, p. 6.

poaching on male preserves” (Stowell 21). Actresses provided a more feminine, gentler model that was regarded as much less threatening and disruptive to male spectators.

Due to both its increased popularity and acceptance among women, and the political activity of many actresses, theatre became a natural ally for suffrage supporters. During the early twentieth century, many, if not most, suffrage rallies had a theatrical component, either a performance, a speech, or a staged reading. A myriad of benefit performances to raise money for the suffrage cause also blossomed during this period. Theatre was seen by many as the best way to get the attention of both women and men to the cause, without seeming overly didactic or threatening. As Henrietta Crosman, a radical suffrage supporter, stated at a suffrage rally for the William Lloyd Garrison Equal Suffrage League in 1909:

What is needed more than anything else is a good suffrage play. The theatre is better than the Church for preaching sermons. You can get a man to go to the theatre with you when you can't get him to go to church. We want a good suffrage comedy. (NY Times May 5, 1909)

“Good suffrage comedies” became increasingly popular as tools for disseminating suffrage information. Two groups were especially targeted by these performances; working class women for whom equality in the workplace and political agency were particularly important, and upper class women who had the funds to support the cause, and the time to recruit and agitate for it. Miss Mary A. Donnelly, President of the Business and Professional Women’s League, was particularly interested in providing opportunities for working class women to join the suffrage cause and to see suffrage plays. She worked

with Carrie Chapman Catt to teach working girls how to become stump speakers, giving speeches in favor of the suffrage movement, and campaign workers for the suffrage movement. Theatre was the next step in the inculcation process. In a *NY Times* interview, she said:

It is my desire...to give an opportunity to shop girls and working women to see a good play at least twice a month. I have suggested to a number of theatrical managers the feasibility of giving us reductions on the usual price of tickets. Winthrop Ames has been the first to acquiesce, but I think that others will follow suit. This arrangement will work to the benefit both of the managers and the working girls. (NY Times 22 Sept. 1913)

Donnelly understood that giving the shop girls the opportunity to see plays would increase their knowledge of suffrage ideas and allow them to see and relate to strong female characters. Suffrage organizers understood that the working women, if they could present a united front, would be a formidable presence supporting women's enfranchisement. Theatre was an excellent way to disseminate information to them and allow them to see the suffrage debate as well as images of the plight of downtrodden working women on stage. The theatrical managers would benefit from increased audience sizes and the support of one of the largest women's organizations in New York. Even in this article, Donnelly demonstrates her ability to both charm and encourage theatrical managers to support her. By naming a popular producer who had already agreed to her plan, she could practically guarantee that others would provide the same discount, or risk losing reputation or potential audience support. This is part of a well thought out plan to

bring working women into the suffrage fold, and to build on emerging support from theatrical managers and producers.

The other group that was most important to suffrage organizers was the wealthy women who could both support the cause financially, and actively. These women had access to wealth, and time to actively promote the cause. The difficulty lay in finding ways to get these women to understand how the cause related to them, to shake them of their upper class apathy, and to get them to express solidarity with other women. It was much easier for them to do nothing, or to make the more conservative decision to stand behind their wealthy husbands and choose the anti-suffrage, indirect influence method of political ‘inaction.’ Theatre was, therefore, an excellent vehicle to attract these women. The theatre was a place to see and be seen, and socialite women wanted to attend popular plays. These plays could then entertain and also motivate these women to take action. Merging theatre with suffrage agitation created popular suffrage drama that became necessary attendance for the socially elite. They joined the cause because theatre made it a popular thing to do.

Newspapers and magazines began publishing articles showing the increased status and popularity of suffrage drama. A 1916 *Theatre Magazine* article about a suffrage operetta, “Melinda and Her Sisters,” opened with, “On February eighteenth, at the Waldorf Astoria, society and the stage met at the performance of an operetta on the subject of women’s suffrage” (TM XXIII). This opening sentence immediately demonstrates the quality of the audience simply by mentioning the location; one of the most luxurious hotels in New York City. The article later says, “The exclusive set was present to laugh at the



thrusts sung and spoken. Mrs. Belmont calculated well its effect upon her audience” (TM XXIII). Again, referencing the elite audience and their positive reaction to the play enforced the idea that the wealthy were interested in, and supportive of suffrage ideology. A *NY Times* article about the same operetta states at this single event raised \$8,000 for the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, the equivalent of about \$160,000 in 2008. According to the *NY Times*, “All the performers, professionals as well as amateurs, gave their services and costumes for the play. Everything was contributed” (NY Times 20, Feb. 1916). The performers, many of whom were amateurs and less than famous actresses cared enough about the cause to donate their time, talent, and property. This speaks volumes about the support of the theatrical community for the suffrage cause. At this time, most actresses were required to contribute their own dresses for any roles they played. For actresses to wear their precious costumes at a benefit performance instead of saving them for paid roles is quite a feat. This would only have been done for an audience that would truly appreciate the sacrifice. This operetta, like many suffrage propaganda plays, knew its intended audience and tried to speak directly to the wealthy social elite using humor and satire. Again according to *Theatre Magazine*, “The arguments are sound and the sallies against society amusing. These and kindred lines caused good humored laughter” (TM XXIII). Suffrage dramatists attempting to entice wealthy supporters knew that they could not rail against social conventions or alienate the wealthy with didactic, populist rhetoric. These plays provided entertainment first, along with more subtle suffrage messages.

Another popular suffrage theatrical event that raised a good deal of money for the cause and garnered quite a bit of attention was “Suffrage Week” at the Comedy Theatre,

hosted by the Washington Square Players. This week-long event held in March of 1917 provided opportunities for several different theatrical groups to present scenes, entire plays, speeches, and readings in support of the suffrage movement. This became another social event that elite New Yorkers attended. Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, President of the national Women's Suffrage Party, spoke to open the event; other important speakers included Katharine B. Davis, Mary Garrett Hay and Mary Shaw. The NY Times reported that the theatre was "decorated with flags and banners and the ushers [wore] yellow sashes" (NY Times 12, Mar 1917). Yellow was a recognized support color for the women's suffrage movement.

Some of the plays presented during the week included Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, *Lovers Luck* by Georges de Porto Riche, and *Tintagiles* by Maurice Maeterlinck, translated by Phillip Moeller. Though only *Trifles* is overtly feminist, all of these plays have strong female characters. Glaspell's *Trifles* demonstrates a strong community of women who, when a man is found murdered, find the evidence (a dead canary) that implicates the wife right under the noses of the oblivious male characters, and protect the woman because she has been abused and acted in self-defense. The other two were chosen because of their appeal to female audiences. Riche's play, however, had not been well received in an earlier production. Alexander Woollcott of the *NY Times* said, "It is not a good one-act play...a thin, suffocating steam rises from all his work" (NY Times 8, Oct 1916). Perhaps the Washington Square Players were attempting to resurrect a play that would appeal to women with its multiple love stories. *Tintagiles*, likewise was non-realistic marionette play that featured strong female characters; the Queen who pursues, imprisons, and kills

the male Tintagiles, and Ygraine who attempts, unsuccessfully, to save him. All of these plays spoke to the struggles of women, and empowered women in some way. Choosing all European plays, and having no overt suffrage propaganda plays in the line-up, was a conscious decision to cultivate a middle and upper class audience of both men and women. These plays were primarily entertaining, but also enlightening and motivating, especially in combination with suffrage speakers and themes. They were non-threatening to male audiences or women who considered themselves to be anti-suffrage, yet presented strong, active women in generally positive representations that would have subtly supported and demonstrated the ability of women to have and use political agency advantageously.

One other suffrage performance that garnered a lot of critical and popular attention was the *Mi-Carême* benefit matinee at the Lyceum Theatre on March 21, 1911. Initially this event was popularized because of the casting of Miss Jane Austen, an adorable black and tan terrier in the play, *How the Vote Was Won*. According to the *NY Times*, Miss Austen, “is the little suffragette dog who carries Aunt Lizzie’s suffrage contributions basket” (*NY Times* 16, Mar 1911). Who can resist donating money when an adorable dog comes calling? The theatre was also decorated to immediately demonstrate support for suffrage with purple, green, and white banners all over the house. This benefit to raise money for the Women’s Political Union particularly reached out to men and women who had never before supported the suffrage cause before. In a curtain speech before the performances, WPU leader and suffragist, Mrs. Stanton Blanch, welcomed the crowd, and especially those new to the cause or undecided. As she said, “There are some of you who are on the fence in regard to suffrage. That is a very undignified position” (*NY Times* 22

Mar 1911). She urged those present to both support the suffrage cause with donations at the benefit, but to also return for a large-scale suffrage parade scheduled for May 6. She explained that once audiences had seen these performances and participated in the active and motivating parade, they would “never doubt again to which side [they] belong” (NY Times 22 Mar 1911). Military veteran John Bigelow also attempted to inspire the men in the audience with his male-oriented reasoning to support female enfranchisement. He wrote a letter in support of the women’s cause:

I never saw any good reason why I was permitted to vote and my mother was not, if she cared to...Neither do I see any reason why the ballot box should be withheld from your sex under any government which has espoused the doctrine of popular sovereignty. (NY Times 16, Mar 1911)

Bigelow was already a political supporter of women’s suffrage, and now became a supporter of suffrage theatre. The program that he saw and supported included Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John’s play *How the Vote Was Won*, and Gertrude Jennings’s *A Woman’s Influence* along with harp music and a reading by Mrs. LeMoyne.

This benefit performance included both professional and amateur performers, who brought in additional audiences and increased interest . One of the amateur performers, Mrs. John Winters Brannan, learned a newfound respect for the struggles of professional actors from her first experience on stage with professionals. As she said:

I had no idea they gave so much of their life to the work...To see the way in which in our plays, for which they give their services, they throw themselves into the

work, rehearsing again and again certain scenes and considering their roles from every point of view has been a revelation to me. (NY Times 16, Mar 1911)

Putting amateur actors like Brannan onstage with professionals was not unique to suffrage benefits. This strategy had been a popular method for producers to increase audience sizes and make more money for years. Allowing a young, aristocratic or upper middle class lady to “tread the boards” for a performance was excellent public relations for theatre producers, and drew wealthier crowds eager to support the whims and fancies of young women of their class. According to Tracy Davis in *Actresses as Working Women*:

With middle-class actresses, the stage could be populated by women who not only looked and sounded like gentlefolk, but who walked and performed life’s little ceremonies like them too, because they were, indeed, gentle, and everyone could clearly see and hear that they were. (Davis 77)

Middle and upper class theatergoers wanted to see themselves mirrored on stage, and the truest way to do this was to see women of their own class performing in the dramas. Often, the young lady would even pay the producer for the experience of performing. Amateur theatricals became acceptable for middle and upper class women long before professional, career actresses were accepted fully. In fact, the abundance of amateurs literally waiting in the wings for a chance to perform delayed professionalization and social acceptance of women who actually wanted to earn money for their performances, or who sought to make performing their actual career.

Suffrage groups quickly recognized that allowing socialite ladies to join their performances would ensure a wider female audience at least, and would bring their cause

to the forefront of social awareness. Benefits and performances to raise interest in current social and economic issues functioned on several levels for the women in attendance. On the surface, a typical benefit performance provided escapism and entertainment in a nurturing female oriented environment. Often benefits were held to get attention and money for one of many social issues such as poverty, education, animal welfare, or for actor's funds to help actors get through tough times. This type of civic engagement and social awareness had become part of the feminine sphere in wealthy society, so it was natural for women to attend these functions, learn about a cause, become motivated toward action, and give either time or money to promote the cause afterwards.

Suffrage groups, worried about their reputation as being too forward or overly masculinized in their desires for political and economic equality, quickly discovered that the benefit performance event trope would work for their cause as well. It would also have the added benefit of feminizing the mission of women's suffrage in order to recruit more women, and the men that cared about them, to the cause. Suffrage groups held benefits and performances, such as the ones described above, to educate and motivate women to join their ranks. Unlike simple suffrage meetings, however, the theatrical performance lent an air of credibility to the event, and made it acceptable for society women to attend without appearing to challenge their male-dominated social hierarchy. The plays presented tended to be written in the popular drawing room comedy style, which was also a comfortable middle and upper class theatrical conceit. Again according to Davis, "The cup and saucer drama...was based on the domestic lives of the middle class, and attracted a new audience of well-to-do playgoers who preferred to see their lives portrayed by their

own caste” (77). A didactic message about women’s rights or equality could be hidden behind witty language, middle class morality, and the backdrop of romance.

Audiences at these theatrical benefits could receive the message of the necessity for increased rights for women without having to directly engage with a speechmaker or real women agitating for a cause. Though realism was the goal of much of the theatre of the time, and though middle class values and situations permeated the contemporary theatre, it was still theatre, and therefore not real life. Theatre was a non-threatening environment in which ideas could be presented, debated, and seen by audiences without being directly or overtly challenging to the status quo. Suffrage groups, along with most every political theatre practitioner in history, however, understood the power of a theatrical performance to instill the seeds of change. They could see the potential for audiences to become emotionally invested in the fates of characters, and to become motivated to action by the rhetoric of a play. The very acceptance of theatre by mainstream society created a venue in which subversive ideas could be presented openly, but because they are set in a fictional world, without real fear of political reprisal. Although theatre is presented live, and emotions can only be triggered in the moment, the ability for attendees to discuss and rehash the event allows the message to be received by a wider audience, and allows the fictitious world of a play to instigate real-world action. Theatrical performances, therefore, became a widely used recruiting, and information disseminating tool for the women’s suffrage movement.

In the next chapter, I will continue to look at recruitment and retention tools of the suffrage and women’s rights movement as they relate to Victorian British society. I will

look closely at two plays, Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women!* and George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, that include themes of women's rights, and suffrage and discuss how these ideas were debated in British society. I will also demonstrate how the suffrage movement in Britain both paralleled and deviated from the concurrent movement in the United States. The productions of these plays in particular were quite important for both the women's suffrage movement and the formation of clubs for actresses in England.



### CHAPTER 3: Upstart Women and Social Pariahs: Social and Political Calls to Action in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Votes for Women*

“What was wanted of women of the stage was, first and mainly what was wanted of women outside – a knack of pleasing” (Chothia, *New Woman* xi). So said actress and playwright Elizabeth Robins. She understood the expectations and traditional roles of women in the late nineteenth century both on and off stage. Women were supposed to be feminine and to “please” men. At this time, women were, however, becoming more politically aware, and were organizing to work for political and social change. Gaining the right to vote was a political rallying point in both Britain and the United States. The role of women in a modern society was also being hotly debated as educational and professional doors began opening for women while traditional values of the “domestic sphere” as the proper place for women began to slowly fade. Playwrights began to grapple with these social and political changes and present new ideas of femininity on stage. I will now look at two playwrights, who were socially and politically active, and who used their plays as vehicles to present controversial ideas about the roles of women in society. Elizabeth Robins’ play, *Votes for Women!*, and George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, put strong women on stage in direct confrontation with conventional ideas. The strong women in these plays made no apologies for past deeds or unfeminine behavior, and demonstrated their ability to engage with and compete with men favorably for social, economic, and political influence. They became examples for future generations of strong female characters. The strong female characters in these plays also

drew new, upstart female run theatre organizations and suffrage activists to present these plays in order to bring these women to the public's attention.

Elizabeth Robins' most famous play, *Votes for Women!*, became a rallying point for the women's suffrage movement, opening the floodgates for suffrage related propaganda plays. It also played an important role in the foundation of the Actresses Franchise League in London. *Votes for Women!* is one of the few suffrage plays that utilizes the traditional three act, full-length dramatic structure, unlike many other agit-prop short plays written to be presented as part of a larger suffrage meeting or performance. Robins both uses and subverts the traditions of the drawing room comedy. The initial setting and dialogue appear to set up this genre. According to Renata Kobetts Miller, "*Votes for Women* employs social and theatrical conventions to engage audiences, both within and outside the play, in order to expose and critique those conventions" (Miller 150). Act I of the play takes place in the Hall of Wynnstay House, a public room in a private home. The opening of the play creates in the audience an expectation for a comedy, complete with romance, intrigue, and a woman with a past. Audiences are quickly aware, however, that this play has ulterior motives as many of the female characters demonstrate a political awareness, and most of the early dialogue revolves around recent political activities, based on true events, of militant suffragette groups and the treatment of these upstart women by law enforcement figures. Act II leaves traditional conventions behind as the play moves to an outdoor setting, a Trafalgar Square suffrage rally. Here many different opinions of suffrage are voiced by characters from several different classes. Robins writes in working class dialect for several characters. She uses

the outdoor political rally setting because it represents a place where people from different classes could legitimately mingle and express opinions. Act III returns to the domestic setting, but instead of polite banter, denouement, and romance, political action is discussed and gender roles are reversed.

The plot of this play mainly focuses on three characters; Geoffrey Stonor, an up and coming member of Parliament, his young fiancée, Jean Dunbarton, and his former lover turned suffragist, Vida Levering, though there are a host of minor characters that help to distill various opinions regarding the suffrage argument. At the beginning of the play, Dunbarton is the epitome of the naïve, wealthy, feminine ideal. Her naivete is challenged throughout the play through exposure to politically active women who work for social and political change. Throughout the play, Dunbarton wrestles with her struggle to learn about the suffrage movement and of her fiancée's past romantic involvement with Levering.

Levering is the pivotal character in the plot of the play. In this character, Robins attempts to challenge the stereotypical image of the New Woman as dowdy, masculine, and overly intellectual. According to Sheila Stowell, "Levering's femininity (Robins insists that she is attractive and well-dressed) becomes a deliberate attempt to counter prevailing stereotypes of suffrage supporters as 'unnatural' masculinized women poaching on male preserves" (Stowell 21). Levering initially fits the role of the "woman with a past" that appears in many Victorian plays and novels. Unlike these women who generally serve the function of teaching a moral lesson, however, she does not have to suffer in the end by leaving proper society for a convent or committing suicide. At the end of the play she merely continues to fight for suffrage, happily unmarried, and quite independent.

Levering demonstrates quite a bit of political and social clout in this play as well. By the end of the political rally in Act II, her speech has convinced Dunbarton to join the fight, and “To ask that woman to let me have the honour of working with her” (Robins 186).

When Dunbarton realizes that it was her own fiancé’s cowardice that caused Levering to abort their baby and leave him, Dunbarton decides that Stonor should make amends by offering to marry Levering. Levering does not want any marriage, particularly not one based on guilt. She instead convinces Dunbarton to join the suffrage cause and force Stonor to be an ally, willing or not. She tells her that they now have power over him. He is in her words, “In debt to women. He can’t repay the one he robbed – ...No, he can’t repay the dead. But there are the living. There are the thousands with hope still in their hearts and youth in their blood. Let him help *them*. Let him be a Friend to Women” (Robins 195).

Interestingly, perhaps to demonstrate to male audiences that women voting would be in their best interest, Robins makes Stonor aware of the political possibilities of enfranchising certain conservative, propertied women whose influence could stop the political ruckus the working classes are making. As he says to Dunbarton, “After all...women are much more conservative than men – aren’t they? Especially the women the property qualification would bring in...However little they want to, women of our class will have to come in line” (Robins 189). Levering’s attempt to blackmail him with Dunbarton’s allegiance, almost hurt her cause by nearly making him change his mind, but in the end, he does the “right” thing (and the politically expedient thing) and backs the vote for women. The ending of the play is reminiscent of the classic drawing room comedy in

that Dunbarton and Stonor will stay together, their romance perhaps stronger now that she has learned to have her own opinions and to be her own person. The dramatic conflict is resolved in that Levering gets what she wants, political agency, and some kind of closure with Stonor. Once again, however, Robins subverts the genre by leaving Levering happily unmarried; she refuses two marriage offers. As she says, “I’ve come to a place where I realize that the first battles of this new campaign must be fought by women alone. The only effective help men could give – amendment of the law – they refuse. The rest is nothing” (199). To her, marriage is meaningless without equality, which women have yet to achieve.

*Votes for Women!* made an immediate, and drastic impact on the suffrage movement. As Susan Carlson says, “Robins’ *Votes for Women!* offered an auspicious start to suffrage drama. Drawing both from comedy of manners and agit-prop pageantry, the play is simultaneously predictable and subversive and exemplifies the contradictory theatre practices of the time” (103). Carlson goes on to connect this play favorably with others that deal with the “nuances of Edwardian women’s social and political options” (104). Act II in particular, inspired and freed other suffrage playwrights from the confines of the drawing room, and opened the doors for the pageant plays and suffrage rally propaganda plays that followed. Robins’ use and subversion of the popular drawing room comedy demonstrated to other suffrage-minded writers that overt didacticism was not the only way to create thought-provoking theatre that would attract audiences, and more importantly, get those audiences to consider supporting the messages being promoted.

This play was presented for the first time by Harley Granville Barker at the Court Theatre on April 9, 1907. Barker was supportive of the woman's suffrage cause; his wife at the time, Lillah McCarthy was an active suffragist. He correctly felt that the time was ripe for an overtly political drama about the suffrage issue, as the play continued to draw large audiences at the Court Theatre for over a year (Stowell 15). This play was also fundamental in the formation of the Actresses Franchise League in 1908. The AFL began as a political society of actresses who wanted the vote. In their first resolution printed in the magazine, *Votes for Women* on December 24, 1908, it states: "This meeting of actresses calls upon the Government immediately to extend the franchise to women; that women claim the franchise as a necessary protection for the workers under the modern industrial conditions" (qtd in Holledge 49-50). The League was immediately political, and immediately championed workers rights. The actresses, both famous and not, aligned themselves with working class women and worked for equality in the workplace. According to Julie Holledge, "The plays that...provided the basis for the AFL repertoire kept well clear of specific suffrage party politics and concentrated on the generalized sexual inequalities of Edwardian society" (Holledge 65). The League would also continue to be linked with both Elizabeth Robins and her play, *Votes for Women* for years. Robins served as the Vice President of the League, and the play was read and presented at several benefits, readings, and suffrage meetings over the next several years.

Though most playwrights of suffrage drama were female, several male writers were also interested in the effects of the New Woman on society and onstage, and how the modern era was redefining male/female relationships. George Bernard Shaw often wrote

controversial female characters into his plays, and he seemed to have an affinity for the strong woman and for transgressing the boundaries of “moral society.” One of his most controversial, and most progressive plays, was Mrs. *Warren’s Profession*. In this play he presented prostitution, but not in a moralizing cautionary tale. He presented a model prostitute, who had earned enough from her success at her trade to rise through the ranks to brothel ownership, and franchisement. On the surface, Kitty Warren was a respectable upper middle class businesswoman, who was able to put her daughter Vivie through private school, and Cambridge on the money she had made. Her money came, however, not from a husband, or even from legitimate business, but from prostitution. The play forces the audience to consider the double standards between men and women, and what is considered acceptable behavior for both. According to Jean Chothia,

The play pushes the debate about the double standard and male-female relationships on to new ground, introducing questions about the interactive structure of power and economic dependency that compels women on any level of society by being, in Mrs. Warren’s words, ‘good to some man that can afford to be good to her.’” (Chothia 44)

Kitty Warren pulled herself up from a less than working class existence to a wealthy life by capitalizing on the wants and needs of men, yet society blames her for immorality, not the men who would not give her a living wage at a factory, and who make her chosen profession lucrative.

Like Robins, Shaw sets up the outline of the comedy of manners, or drawing room play, and subverts it. The play uses a traditional four act structure. Unlike Robins’ play,

however, there is no vast outdoor rally scene, but there are more subtle scene changes that distort the drawing room comedy genre. Three of the acts take place in the country in the sitting rooms and gardens of private homes. The fourth, however, takes place at Vivie's office, significantly a business run by two women. These two women have joined together in business and even employ a male clerk. Once again instead of wrapping up loose ends, and planning or showing a marriage between the two lovers, this play ends with a young woman choosing independence and her work over domestic life. Vivie is not a suffragist, but she is a New Woman. She is educated, progressive, and yearns to be taken seriously in the business world. There is nothing that any man can do to convince her otherwise. As she says, "once and for all, there is no beauty and no romance in life for me. Life is what it is; and I am prepared to take it as it is" (Shaw 104).

Shaw provides two central women in this play, and they represent two very different types. Kitty Warren is from an older generation. She is a "woman with a past (and present)," but she is dependent on men for her economic and social status. She is a shrewd businesswoman, but understands that her success comes from her ability to please men and to give them what they want. She wants a different life for her child, and therefore distances herself from her child, so Vivie can live the upper middle class life that Kitty envisions for her. Vivie is an early twentieth century New Woman, masculinized and educated. According to Chothia, "Elements of the ...stereotype of the New Woman are evident in Vivie Warren's hearty handshake, dress, and failing housewifery" (Chothia 157). I would add to that list her penchant for smoking cigars and her choice to study mathematics at university, (where she chose to be lazy and settle for third place in her



class.) Vivie is, however, a moralist. She cannot condone her mother's lifestyle, and when she discovers that it is not simply in the past, but still an active part of her mother's life, she disowns her mother, and refuses to accept her. Interestingly, it is not the prostitution that Vivie objects to as much as the fact that her mother attempted to live in two worlds, the underworld of prostitution, and the respectable upper middle class world in which she raised Vivie. As Vivie says:

Yes: it's better to choose your line and go through with it. If I had been you, mother, I might have done as you did; but I should not have lived one life and believed in another... That is why I am bidding you goodbye now. (Shaw 115)

According to Chothia, there is no catharsis in the play. Traditionally bad characters (the womanizing preacher Rev. Samuel Gardner, and Kitty's partner Crofts) are not punished in any moral kind of way. Kitty is also unpunished for her career choice, except by losing the daughter she never had a real relationship with anyway. Even the good characters don't get what they want; Frank loses Vivie, and Vivie cannot have any real relationship with her absent mother. This lack of moral resolution is a large part of what drew the Lord Chamberlain to censor the play, though other plays about prostitution were allowed; those in which the prostitute was redeemed or killed in the end to restore traditional order.

It was just this censure by the Lord Chamberlain that drew the Pioneer Players to revive this play in 1912, after its aborted first performance. The Pioneer Players, a politically aware and involved subscription society led by Edith Craig and Christopher St. John, were intrigued by the controversies surrounding this play and wanted to add it to their repertoire. According to Katie Cocklin, "A number of the plays produced by the

Pioneer Players concern identifiable political issues or campaigns in terms of the plot and/or the performance context” (Cocklin 47). They were particularly interested in subverting, what Cocklin calls the “conventional construction of the prostitute in separate-spheres ideology” (Cocklin 100). *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was, therefore, an obvious choice for this young theatre organization comprised primarily of women. Women were employed in even traditional male theatre jobs of set construction, lighting, stage management, and directing. The lead roles in the play were specifically performed by actresses, Gertrude Kingston and Ellen O’Malley, who had received accolades for past performances as subversive, rebellious women. Prospective audiences, especially avid theatre goers, would have had some idea of the controversial nature of the play just from reading the playbill.

Shaw’s play certainly served its purpose for the Pioneer Players, to create tension and cause the audience to think differently about issues. It may have served its purpose too well. Several subscription members dropped out of the organization when this play was performed because they felt that Kitty Warren was too proud and open about her profession. Chris St. John had to come to the defense of Kitty Warren to prove that she was a moral woman. As she said:

Mrs. Warren, accepting standards of society as they are, blurting out this awful knowledge of human nature at its worst that her life and position enabled her to gain... *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* is a highly moral play! (qtd in Cocklin 101).

St. John and the Pioneer Players who embraced this play saw in it a truly moral lesson. It demonstrated for them how women could both reap the financial reward of prostitution,

and simultaneously condemn it. Without legitimate economic and political freedom, women would always be forced to “please men” or be at their mercy. Kitty Warren was able to use men to get ahead, and provide a better life for her daughter, but she could never escape the legacy of where her money came from. That she did not want to was the controversy of the play. The fact that she represented millions of disenfranchised women who could not earn a living wage at a respectable job was the real story that led the Pioneer Players to champion this play.

Both George Bernard Shaw and Elizabeth Robins tackled difficult issues in their plays. Robins, an active suffragist herself, naturally wanted to inform audiences about the need for women’s suffrage, and to disabuse audiences of their preconceived notions of what a suffragist New Woman was like. Shaw was always interested in social issue drama, and wanted to question societal mores about the motivations behind prostitution and the double standards rampant between males and females involved in this trade. Upstart theatre companies with political and social agendas both produced and championed these plays in England. The nascent Actresses’ Franchise League gained solid support and motivation following the Court Theatre production of *Votes for Women*. The Pioneer Players were attracted to *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* because it dealt with issues faced by numerous working women that affected all women. They wanted to explore the controversies surrounding this play, and campaign against the capriciousness of the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship regulations.

Both of these plays dealt with issues of censorship and the controversy inherent in presenting new ideas. These were plays that championed women in a time when it was

traditional to make female characters subservient to men. Shaw perhaps wraps up this idea best in his Author's Apology, printed with the play that demonstrates his support of the strong women who worked so hard to present his play. It also fittingly wraps up the sentiments behind all of the work of both the Actresses Franchise League and the Pioneer Players:

*Mrs. Warren's Profession* is a play for women;...it was written for women;...it has been performed and produced mainly through the determination of women ...the enthusiasm of women made its first performance excitingly successful... and not one of these women had any inducement to support it except their belief in the timeliness and the power of the lesson the play teaches. (Shaw 46)

As the work of the Actresses Franchise League and the Pioneer Players demonstrates, British actresses were simultaneously working towards unifying within their profession and providing for the needs of actresses while also becoming politically aware in general and active in the suffrage movement in particular. In the United States, it was a slightly different story. The next chapter looks at the social clubs that American actresses formed, and shows how these clubs were not themselves really politically active, though they set the groundwork for suffrage organizations and provided tools that the suffrage movement took up and ran with such as alternating between social and business meetings, and providing theatrical entertainment to recruit and retain members.

## CHAPTER 4: Social and Political Clubs for Actresses

The homing instinct is strong in the actress breast. Nostalgia is the common ailment among players. Their club means to them home, and they love it as they would love the home their nomadic existence in great measure denies them. (Patterson 182)

Social clubs were quite in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century.

According to Tina Margolis, the “club craze” was at its hottest between 1865 and 1925, and New York City was a “hotbed” of club activity across many different professions and social classes (Margolis 1)<sup>3</sup>. Men and women from many different professions and classes joined clubs to network, relax, socialize, and organize. Theatrical clubs were no different. First came clubs for actors. The Lambs, the Players, and the Friars, for instance, included in their membership most of the leading male actors of the day. These clubs were off limits to their female costars, however. Undaunted, actresses united to start their own social clubs. These clubs served as respites from the whirlwind daily lives of actresses. According to *Theatre Magazine* reporter, Ada Patterson, they were “a place to lunch, to rest and even to refresh...between rehearsals, avoiding the garishness and expense of the great hotels on Broadway” (Patterson 184). There were several documented social clubs for theatrical women in New York between 1890 and 1920, but the three largest, longest lasting, and most well-documented are the Professional Women’s League, the Twelfth Night Players, and the Gamut Club. All three began simply as social clubs for actresses to

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history of men’s and women’s social clubs in the twentieth century, see Tina Margolis’ dissertation, *A History of Theatrical Social Clubs in New York City*.

refresh themselves, to network, to help each other out with charitable contributions, and to socialize. Most of the leading actresses of the time belonged to one or more of these clubs. Eventually, these organizations which were devoted to the helping and renewing women became breeding grounds for organized activist discussions and movements. Though the Professional Women's League and the Twelfth Night Players did not become overtly political, many of their members did. The Gamut Club was actually begun by actress Mary Shaw partly in response to the lack of political consciousness in the other groups. It was the only theatrical women's group to become overtly interested in politics, but these seeds grew directly out of the actions and activities of the earlier groups.

The first theatrical women's club in New York City was the Twelfth Night Club. This club started on a dare between actress Alice Fischer and her fiancé William Harcourt in 1890. Fischer, a small town Indiana native, complained to Harcourt about the lack of social bonding among female theatre practitioners in New York. He asked her why she did not do something about it. At a dinner with friends she broached the idea to Vida Crowley (daughter of Jennie June Crowley, the first American club woman) and Eleanor Tyndale. Before the evening was out, the seeds were planted for a female theatrical social club modeled after the Lambs, one of the clubs already in place for male actors. In an interview with Ada Patterson, Fischer described the goal of the club to improve the social image of actresses. "Let's show them that the girls on stage are as nice as any others...By meeting them on common social ground and behaving as well as they do, in fact, better" (Patterson 183). The members of the Twelfth Night Club had to work against both public negative reactions to actresses in general and women's club organizations in particular. Undaunted

by public opinion, Fischer and her cohorts worked to recruit members from the ranks for new and established actresses and create a positive image for the club. Their efforts quickly paid off as the club swelled in number and membership was capped at 50. After many disappointed prospective members argued, membership was increased to 100, including many of the leading actresses of the day. The Club originally called itself the F.A.D (Fencing, Athletics, and Dancing Club), but in 1891, it changed its name to the Twelfth Night Club based on Maida Craigen's suggestion. Club "godfather" Daniel Frohman suggested the club members adopt the rituals of Twelfth Night by organizing a yearly celebration on January 6<sup>th</sup>. This tradition quickly became a club mainstay event. The original purpose of the club was "educational – to train themselves for better stage work" (Margolis 188). Additional founding members included Viola Allen, Maude Banks, Blanche Bates, May Robson, Annie Russell, Effie Shannon, and Elizabeth Tyree. Eleanor Tyndale was elected the first club president.

The inaugural Twelfth Night celebration was held on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1892. It quickly became an important event for New York society. As Patterson reports, "Many prominent in metropolitan life regard the midwinter holidays as incomplete without attendance at the Twelfth Night revel, and an invitation is something to be desired and preserved among souvenirs and in memory" (Patterson 183). After the first Twelfth Night revel, which was the first time men were admitted to the club, men were subsequently invited in for monthly receptions honoring actors involved with current Broadway shows. According to Patterson, "it was an honor no mere man, be he ever so brave, had the temerity to decline" (Patterson 183). One male honoree, speaking anonymously, said of his presentation at the

club, “There are no footlights between us, and I swear, . . . with three or four hundred women, all well dressed, all handsome and fascinating, swarming about him, a fellow felt as though he had stumbled into the Sultan’s harem, with the Sultan looking on” (Patterson 183-4). Interestingly, despite the fact that this was a club organized by and for women, most of its honored artists were men. Only if no male celebrity of the day was available would the club invite a woman star to be the guest of honor.

The Twelfth Night Club was officially incorporated in April 1893 when it adopted a constitution and by-laws. The club modified its mission at this point to include “the study of the drama and the promotion of social intercourse among women who are on the stage and students and patrons of the dramatic art” (TNC Constitution qtd in Margolis 194). Seventy five percent of members would be of the “dramatic profession” or closely connected with the stage. The other twenty five percent need only be willing to support actresses. The club held meetings twice a month, one for social gathering and one for business. According to the *New York Times*, the club “is intended to furnish for the women of the stage the same social facilities for intercourse that the men of the profession enjoy in their own clubs and it is furnishing for actresses a place of resort in this city which was sadly needed before its organization” (NY Times 12 Oct 1894). The club provided its members with a respite from their difficult lives, and a place to find friendship from both within and outside of the dramatic profession.

This club worked closely with its male counterpart, the Lambs, to host dramatic benefit performances and monthly teas with celebrities. Examples of invited celebrities are John Drew, Richard Mansfield, and William Crane. In October 1894 the club held its first



sold-out benefit at the Empire Theatre. This benefit was shared with the Lambs, members of both performed in the program. Proceeds totaling \$1,966.30 were used to help increase the building fund for a permanent clubhouse. A *New York Times* review of the benefit called it “one of the best ever offered on a testimonial occasion...There were no disappointments...Everything ran as smoothly as it could have done at a regular performance prepared for by many rehearsals” (NY Times 12 Oct 1894). Another benefit, also to raise money for the building fund was held on May 3, 1901. This was the most popular and most successful benefit of the club’s early years. It was also held at the Empire Theatre and included variety acts from many of the leading stars of the day. The *New York Times* reviewed the production, singling out the Cakewalk performed by actors and actresses in blackface. According to a *New York Times* article about the event, “all of the actors and actresses who walk for the cake will appear in blackened faces...it is expected that they will give a great variety of flat-footed, high-stepping, and gallus styles of walking that are so much enjoyed by the admirers of this class of contests” (NY Times 28 Apr 1901).

As the club grew older, it began to align itself more and more with the actors’ clubs as it focused less on self-improvement for women and more on social gathering. As World War I loomed, Margolis says of the club’s conservative stance: “It was not thought to prepare women with a worldly view which would allow them to consider the social issues, such as suffrage, equal rights, and the European conflict” (Margolis 202). This conservatism was not popular with younger members, or the press who wanted the women’s group to be politically active and therefore interesting. Although the club

remains active today, it is mainly a social organization of older women retired from the stage.

Shortly after the founding of the Twelfth Night Club, another group of actresses gathered to form a second club for female theatre practitioners. The Professional Women's League began with five members in 1892. It quickly swelled to 250 and later 500 members including actresses and other women who were interested in theatre. The idea for the club was sparked by Laura Palmer, wife of theatrical manager and producer, A.M. Palmer. According to Patterson, it was originally conceived as a sort of sorority in which "established actresses [could] exercise toward the beginner or the unsuccessful one the spirit of the elder and helpful sister" (Patterson 182). Palmer was already quite involved in the social club scene having been a founder of the Goethe Society in 1885 and a charter member of the Federation of Women's Clubs in 1890. She, and a small group of other actresses, decided that the time was ripe for a club specifically to address the needs of female performers, singers, musicians, and writers. Other founding members included Rachel McAuley, Mary Shaw, Louisa Eldridge, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Bertha Welby, Rosa Rand, and Elizabeth Ward Doremus. Palmer served as the first president of the group. She was elected at the inaugural meeting on December 21, 1892 and would serve as president for the next nine years. On February 28, 1893, the League became incorporated, adopting a constitution and by-laws. Active membership in the League was restricted to actresses, musicians, and playwrights. Associate members included women involved in other professions, but who had an interest in the arts. They were invited in to augment the number of dues paying members and to reach out to women who had an

interest in theatre, but were not necessarily prepared to make it their profession. Life members were those that paid a \$50 fee in addition to the annual dues. The League also elected honorary members; those that had made significant contributions to a variety of professional fields and who were voted on by three-fourths of the membership.

The League had meetings every Monday, each reserved for a different purpose; literary entertainment, business, dramatic entertainment, or social gathering. According to Margolis, one of the distinguishing elements of the Professional Women's League "included financial and material help for those who were unemployed or without means" (Margolis 233). Actresses could rent or borrow costumes from the club's coffers. This was especially helpful since many producers required actresses (but not actors) to furnish their own gowns for performances during this period. According to the *NY Times*, "The League owns one of the largest and most valuable theatrical wardrobes in the country. The thousands of costumes there are in the service of the members" (NY Times 6 Nov 1904). A sampling of activities the League provided to its members included "classes in...dressmaking, French, dancing, fencing, vocal music, china painting, and applied design" (Margolis 236). The League also housed a 15,000 volume library in its clubhouse with, according to then President Mrs. Edward Arden, "all the books that are fit to read" (NY Times 6 Nov 1904). To further the education of the next generation of stage children, the League provided schools for children of actresses, run by members of the League to take care of children while parents were touring. (NY Times 28 Sept 1893). Along with the generous costume repository, the League also loaned money to actresses in need. Only a verbal promise to repay was ever required. The *NY Times* reports that

“Throughout its career the League, acting on requests of needy members, has distributed thousands of dollars in loans, of which nearly every dollar has been repaid, with the grateful expressions of beneficiaries as interest” (NY Times 6 Nov 1904). The League was careful to avoid controversy and stick to its goals of providing society and respite for women. In a July 12, 1895 lecture on “fads,” Marie Merrick “identified suffrage clubs and bicycling as passing phenomena” (Margolis 237). These were not things, in other words, that needed the attention of professional women, as they would quickly pass out of the social consciousness.

The Professional Women’s League was most interested in promoting theatre to its members and for its members. It presented many theatrical productions; both private entertainments and public benefits in order to raise funds for the organization, showcase the talents of its membership, and provide some extra money for struggling actresses. The first production mounted by the group was an all female production of William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* in November 1893 and again in January 1894 at the Garden Theatre. This was one of the first all female versions of a Shakespeare play that was produced for the public. The cast included Fanny Janauschek as Jacques, Ida Jeffreys-Goodfriend as Duke Frederick, Maude Banks as Orlando, and Mary Shaw as Rosalind. In a review of the November production appearing just before the revival, the *NY Times* states, “The previous performances of the play by League members...were among the most unique and venturesome feats ever accomplished by a band of women” (NY Times 28 Jan 1894). In total, 120 women were engaged in some way in this production, which came during an especially rough winter for working actresses. On May 12, 1898 the League

also presented a popular blackface minstrel show at Hammerstein's Lyric Theatre. Approximately 200 League members took part in this song and dance review of popular minstrel and patriotic acts. It included a minstrel olio in blackface by sixteen women, plantation melodies accompanied by banjos, a cakewalk, a sketch entitled "Aunt Chloe's Cabin," and patriotic songs including "Yankee Doodle Dandy." (NY Times 1 May, 1898).

Each year the League sponsored a bazaar in which members sold homemade wares and theatrical memorabilia to the public. Supportive male actors also joined the female members in selling items. According to Patterson, "the radiance blinded public poured in crowds, willing to spend money without stint for the privilege of seeing brilliant and beautiful actresses off the stage and in person face to face in the crowd cheek by jowl" (Patterson 182). This annual bazaar raised ample money for the League and its members and became quite the yearly social event.

In 1902 the club produced one of its largest events, the Woman's Exhibition from October 6<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> at Madison Square Garden. This was an attempt to exhibit "women's progress and contributions to world culture, principally in the nineteenth century" (Margolis 245). This event required four months of planning and the participation of 500 women. It included a "Street of Nations" exhibit showcasing typical domestic environments around the world. Costumed performers romanticized and idealized the living conditions of women across Europe, China, Russia, and Puerto Rico. The Exhibition also included a sale of artwork, a play contest, a Red Cross Society Exhibit, and a bazaar by League members.

The League had several leadership crises during its early years. At the very beginning, Laura Palmer melodramatically asked to be excused from serving as President, and stated that she would only serve for a year or “until such time as some actress could be decided upon to fill the office” (NY Times 21 Dec. 1892). Finding this acceptable actress would take nine years. In 1894 elections took almost four hours, and according the *NY Times*, by the end of the meeting, “even the decorative palms drooped a little” (NY Times 13 Feb 1894). In 1899 at a meeting a rival, Maida Craigen, challenged Palmer’s use of parliamentary procedure, a move that provoked the histrionic Palmer to threaten to resign so that her constituency would rise to her defense. She was re-elected in the next election, but her reputation had suffered. There was now open hostility toward her, and she responded by squelching opposition. The *New York Times* reported in May 1900 that “every member except one has been forbidden to even speak of the officers that were elected at the business meeting” (NY Times 29 May 1900). Palmer was finally forced to step down in 1901 in favor of Sarah Knowles (who was one of her staunchest supporters). After some controversy with ballots and who would be allowed to run for president, ten days before the election in 1906, Mrs. Charles Edward Abbott suddenly withdrew her name from the ballot, and dropped out of the club. She said in a *NY Times* interview, “I am willing to stay in any game from poker to politics if the cards are above the table...but having lifted the lid upon the methods in vogue, I have no further use for the Professional Woman’s League” (NY Times 4 May, 1906). Eventually Susanne Westford was elected instead. In 1908 the leadership was again in question, as Susanne Westford declined to run for re-election. No one in the administration of the League wanted to take on the

arduous job. The League members actually considered hiring a man as President to fill the vacancy. Luckily, a relatively unknown actress, Amelia Bingham, was finally found willing to take the job, and the sanctum of female leadership was not broken.

The original philosophy of the League was “rooted in the ideals of reform and self-help rather than political action” (Margolis 250). In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the woman’s suffrage movement really took off nationally, some members began to agitate for increased political involvement. Actress Mary Shaw was the leader of a group that wanted the League to become more politically active, and to establish a permanent home for actresses instead of renting rooms. In 1913 Shaw ran for League president, but was defeated by Maida Craigen. After her defeat, Shaw struck out on her own and started the Gamut Club, which would become much more politically active. According to a *NY Times* article just after the election, Shaw and her allies wanted more out of the League than it was interested in doing. “They don’t like educational talk, tea, and bridge. They want a home where they can go and relax when they are in town and enjoy themselves comfortably” (NY Times 15 May 1913). The Women’s Professional League continued on as a social haven for actresses, while the Gamut Club became the new politically active branch of the women’s club circuit. Even at the time of the break, the transition seemed to have been relatively smooth and non-violent. As Shaw herself said in a *NY Times* interview, “I am a life member of the League. I have been an officer from the time it was started twenty years ago up to the present, and I shall always continue with it” (NY Times 15 May 1913). Though she disagreed with the direction the club was

headed, it was still important to her, and she did not want to divorce herself completely from the network of actresses and supporters the League provided.

Shaw founded the Gamut Club in 1913 with other defectors from the Professional Women's League including Lillian Russell, Billie Burke, Susanne Westford, and Amelia Bingham. Objecting to the "frivolous character" of the League, they "sought to create a center for intellectual challenge, artistic stimulation, and personal growth" (Margolis 333). The new club was named after the Los Angeles Gamut Club, an artistic men's club that had made Shaw an honorary member in 1912. Shaw wanted a club where women could truly relax and smoke and drink openly. It was also a haven for out-of-town actresses who needed a place to stay in New York. According to Shaw, "The busy women of this city need a meeting place, a half way house for rest and rendezvous" (Patterson 187). Shaw was known as an avid feminist and chose roles that championed women's suffrage and equality such as Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women*, and George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen's plays. This political activism did hurt her career somewhat, so she channeled her energy into her political work, including the Gamut Club. She served as president of the club from 1913 until her death in 1929.

The Gamut Club admitted non-theatre women by 1914, but it was very specific about who could join and the requirements that must be met for continued membership. The club wanted active members who understood the needs of working women. The club's mission statement is indicative of the type of women it recruited:

You must write, or sing, or paint professionally or act or edit or lecture or doctor or teach, or if you do not do any of these things for money, at least you must be vitally



interested in one of them. Positively no parasites permitted. The Idle Rich are severely debarred (The Gamut Club: It's Story qtd in Margolis 342).

From its inception it attracted a different type of woman than the other theatrical social clubs. It spoke to younger more politically active actresses and theatre practitioners. Soon its membership included many top name actresses. The feud with the Professional Woman's League soon cooled. Since the clubs had different agendas, women could be members of both organizations simultaneously.

Although the Gamut Club was much more politically active than the other groups, it too was primarily socially oriented, and hosted similar events to the other social clubs. It held monthly dances, weekly teas, and an annual Christmas masque. Unique to the Gamut Club was its focus on presenting new theatrical works. Short plays written by members including Shaw, Grace Livingston Furniss, Olive Oliver, and others were regularly staged by club members. The club also worked with the Lambs Club to host benefits and lectures to raise money for the Actor's Fund. The "playlets" that they presented at such benefits grew extremely popular and attracted both pre-show notices in major newspapers as well as post-production reviews. This is partially in response to the popularity of social clubs in general, but also a validation of the excellent theatrical work done by members of this club. Most of the plays presented had strong female characters triumphing through difficult social and economic situations. Shaw's plays most of all often portrayed feminist themes. *The Parrot Cage*, for instance, is an allegory about the role of women trapped in male-dominated society (Margolis 347). According to Robert Schanke, the play was an

overtly feminist theatre piece. “In the biting satire, Shaw gave five women costumed like parrots the opportunity to perch and to talk of feminism” (Schanke 105).

Activism was important to the Gamut Club; evidenced by Mary Shaw’s particular blend of political activity, and social consciousness. Shaw wanted women to have a support system which they could then use to encourage other women to join both this club and the movement to promote women’s rights. She understood the mood of her era, and knew that women would be most effective at creating change if they worked from within their domestic, charitable milieu to empower each other. As she said:

The Gamut Club offers a wonderful avenue of education in tolerance and kindness and Christian charity. These are things women need to learn – loyalty to their sex, and patience with each other and appreciation of the individual struggle every woman is making in her particular line of endeavor. (qtd. in Schanke 104)

Shaw felt that it was extremely important for women to be able to exercise their intellect and their social and political agency. She felt that the time was ripe for women to organize to fight for political and social change. The club joined with the Women’s Political Union in their 1912 “dress strike.” This strike, in which women refused to buy dresses until suffrage was granted, lasted until 1915, when the suffrage amendment first reached the referendum stage. This was a semi-successful blow to the fashion industry, and a step that was noticed by political and economic leaders for its organization and wide-spread participation among elite women (Schanke 105). One of the club’s most popular political events occurred on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1914. The “Parade for Peace” was a silent procession from Columbus Circle, down Broadway, to Union Square. Women in the parade wore

black mourning clothing or black armbands in support of mothers who had lost sons in World War I and to support America's current isolationist policies. Over 15,000 women marched in this groundbreaking parade protesting World War I. The parade route was well attended by silent audiences who understood the power of the silent march. Once the United States entered the war in 1917, however, the club, like all other theatrical social clubs, did support the war effort by staging a variety of plays including George Bernard Shaw's *New Woman* play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and one-act plays written by club members as benefits for servicemen. The club also participated in war drives, selling Liberty Bonds, helping the Red Cross, and hosting soldiers for tea.

When the war was over, and the woman's suffrage amendment passed in 1920, support for the Gamut Club diminished. Many women were not interested in continuing to be politically active once they had achieved their initial goals. The club rallied upon the news upon Mary Shaw's death in 1929 during and after the club's memorial services for its fallen leader. It continued to exist through the early 1960s, but had to begin admitting men in the late 1950s to stay financially viable. In the 1960s the club seems to have simply disbanded from lack of interest. According to Margolis, "the loss of Shaw, coupled with a more conservative move toward women's rights after woman won the vote, moved the club away from its original ideals, diluted its philosophy, and perhaps eventually helped to lead to its demise" (Margolis 361).

Women's theatrical social clubs became vitally important to sustain the livelihoods and networking of actresses at the turn of the twentieth century. These organizations served as respites from rehearsal halls, places for food and fellowship, and charitable

organizations to help fellow actresses who needed costumes or money to continue. They were primarily social organizations, and performances to benefit members were popular. Only the Gamut Club was overtly political, though certainly all clubs provided the opportunity for like minded women to meet and discuss important social, economic, and political issues. These clubs also allowed new and lesser known actresses to meet and learn from more established actresses. They started as a response to the exclusivity of the male actors' organizations which prohibited female membership. By creating a haven for actresses, and engaging in feminine activities such as tea socials, theatrical benefits, and lectures and classes, these organizations became important examples of successful female-run businesses.

These clubs were also very effective in another way. They demonstrated to leaders of local and national women's suffrage organizations how effective theatrical productions could be to recruit and retain members. Theatre was also an excellent tool to motivate audiences to action as one of its goals is creating and maintaining emotional connections to material being presented.

## Conclusion

Suffrage leaders found the balance between overt power and femininity in two different, yet complimentary solutions; tea and theatre. Combined, these were simple, yet elegant methods to work from within the cult of domesticity, from within the safe, feminine order to enact change on a widespread, social, economic, and most of all, political scale. Tea events had long been acceptable outlets for women to network and form bonds. Women, especially wealthy women, gathered daily for tea and chat. This was a safe haven for women to communicate, share knowledge, discuss problems, and form friendships and bonds. Suffragists quickly realized that organized teas could also be recruitment grounds for suffrage supporters, or at least occasions to disseminate information about the cause, and debate how this issue related to, and affected the lives of all women, from all classes. Most importantly, tea was in no way seen by men as potentially combative or subversive. Women gathering for tea would go virtually unnoticed by men, but once together, women could use this opportunity to educate each other, and to motivate other women to join the cause.

Theatre was similarly seen as part of the women's milieu. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had again become popular for the middle and upper classes to attend performances. Women flocked to the theatre in droves, creating, by the end of the Civil War, the phenomenon of the matinee idol. Women and girls attended matinees, often unescorted, to see their favorite leading actors playing romantic roles. Newspapers and magazines, such as the *New York Times*, and *Theater Magazine*, wrote in the early years of the twentieth century that theatre had become primarily a venue for women, and that men

attended simply to escort their wives, daughters, and girlfriends, or in order to see and be seen by single women. Suffrage leaders quickly learned, that theatre could be a perfect opportunity to educate women about their political agency, to debate the suffrage issue in a safe, non-real and non-threatening environment, and to motivate women, and perhaps their male escorts, to become active supporters of the cause.

Actress Mary Shaw, one of the leading suffrage activists in the American suffrage movement was able, in an interview with the *New York Sun*, to distill the most important message of the women's suffrage fight in the following passage:

To me the first fruits of suffrage seem to be the sustaining thought – the equality of women's value as compared with man's. We must foster the belief that what we are and stand for is of as much importance. It is along that line that we must develop ourselves and not allow our habits of thought, our inheritance, to retard our best expression. We must search for things within ourselves, not in our environment, and not drug ourselves with formulas and compromises. Suffrage is valuable as one means of the realization of this importance. The conception of political equality is an enlightenment to many women. It is a new thought that will lead us on a great distance. With men the ballot has done wonders in increasing social and spiritual value. There is nothing like enfranchisement to bring home responsibility and the importance of the individual. (qtd in Auster, *Actresses* 84-85)

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