

Agitating for Change: Theatre and a Feminist ‘Network of Resistance’

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Focusing on the UK, where feminism is gaining momentum through multiple sites of activist dissent from a neoliberal hegemony, my primary concern in this article is to understand how, given this renewal of feminist energies, theatre might be able to play its part in agitating for change. Inspired by Chantal Mouffe’s compelling description of a ‘network of resistance’, as a possible way forward I conceive of theatre politically as a series of heterogeneously formed sites of oppositional and affirmative activity, each linked into articulating dissent from neoliberalism and the desire for socially progressive change. This provides the critical framework for my engagement with three radically diverse performances ranging from new playwriting (Lucy Kirkwood’s NSFW), through the flash mob (Eve Ensler’s One Billion Rising campaign), to the West End musical Made in Dagenham.

On 16 December 2014 a group of women rallied outside the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London, in support of a campaign for women’s pay called Mind the Pay Gap. More than forty years after the UK’s Equal Pay Act (1970) it is still the case that women lag significantly behind men in terms of earnings.¹ The protest had a legislative objective: to press for the implementation of Section 78 of the 2010 Equality Act that would force large companies to make public and transparent how much their employees are paid. Among those demonstrating were some of the women who in 1968 made feminist history by striking for equal pay at a Ford car factory in Dagenham, Essex; their action was instrumental in achieving the 1970 Equal Pay Act. Appearing alongside the surviving factory workers from 1968 were cast members of the West End musical *Made in Dagenham*, a show that tells the story of the women’s strike. Browsing the high-profile press coverage of this event I was struck by the distinctive presence of these two very different sets of actors. What role was theatre playing in this revival of feminist activism indebted to its second-wave past?

The Mind the Gap campaign is just one example of a growing number of women’s protests that show signs of feminism regaining momentum as a social movement, emerging out of multiple sites of activist dissent against the UK’s neoliberal hegemony, with its free-market economy, reduced social welfare and deepening inequalities. My primary concern is to understand how, given this renewal of feminist energies, theatre might be able to play its part in agitating for change. To this end, I begin by tracing feminism’s current rejuvenation and reflect on the complex, if not vexed, question of how we might conceive of theatre’s political agency. Inspired by Chantal Mouffe’s compelling description of a ‘network of resistance’ as a possible way forward, I conceive of theatre politically as a series of heterogeneously formed sites of oppositional and

affirmative activity, each linked into articulating dissent from neoliberalism and the desire for socially progressive change.² This provides the critical framework for my engagement with three radically diverse performances ranging from new playwriting (Lucy Kirkwood's *NSFW*), through the flash mob (Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising campaign), to the musical *Made in Dagenham*. Assembling these as a network of feminist resistance to neoliberalism, I analyse the different contributions each is potentially able to make: political theatre's interrogation of what feminism now stands for (*NSFW*), the globally organized flash mob exemplifying intersectionality in practice (One Billion Rising), and the musical entertaining the idea of standing up for women's equality (*Made in Dagenham*). Heterogeneous in terms of forms and feminisms, when brought together these different works exemplify how we might, then, think of theatre as a 'network of resistance'.

Feminism re-resigned: towards a 'network of resistance'

The 'undoing' of late twentieth-century Western feminism, as Angela McRobbie terms it, is by now a familiar story; archetypically it tells of backlash, anti-feminist sentiments and the appropriation of feminism into a neoliberal agenda.³ The transformation from feminism conceived as a socially progressive force for change into a neoliberal mode of individualistically styled 'empowerment' can be cursorily glimpsed through the backlash shifts in the feminist lexicon: for 'equality' read 'autonomy'; for 'collective' see 'individual'; for 'radical' substitute 'liberal'; for 'emancipatory' see all of the above.⁴ From my UK perspective, without a movement of women seeking to reappropriate feminism and redefine what it stands for, since the turn of the millennium it has been difficult to see how the socially progressive ends of feminism might be returned to, as opposed to the widely (mass-media) proclaimed end of feminism.

However, the advent of the current decade has seen an exponential growth in the number of women's campaigns, occasioning high-profile attention to the ongoing struggle for women's liberation. Some commentators, like *Guardian* journalist Kira Cochrane, see the extent of this activity as evidence of the emergence of a fourth wave of feminism. Cochrane argues that these renewed political energies can be attributed to feminism rising in the wake of a raft of other wide-ranging protests.⁵ Notable protests in the UK include student riots over tuition fees for higher education (2010), Occupy London as part of the global Occupy movement (2011–12), and a series of strike actions against cuts to public-sector pensions (2011). To posit these widespread protests as a possible influence on the outcrop of women's campaigns lends credence to what Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe term a 'chain of equivalences': political identities formed around a site of oppression yet receptive to, and capable of intersecting with, equivalent struggles and demands, thereby fostering the capacity 'to push for the radicalization of democracy and to establish a new hegemony'.⁶ At this time, Mouffe reflects, it would require a 'vast chain of equivalences' in order to challenge neoliberalism.⁷ To what extent current protests will prove to be 'vast' still remains to be seen, but feminism rising against the backdrop of equivalent protests as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, however fragile this may prove in the long term, could at least be viewed as hopeful.

Optimism about the ‘beginning of neoliberalism’s end as an economic regime’ has certainly characterized the US-based perspective of political theorist Nancy Fraser. In the wake of Obama’s election she wrote of capitalism as being ‘at a critical crossroads’ and speculated on ‘a new wave of mobilization aimed at articulating an alternative’.⁸ As far as the UK is concerned, the hegemony of economic neoliberalism did not immediately crack open as many predicted it would after the global banking crisis of 2008. Rather, neoliberal austerity measures are what the UK government, led by the Conservative Party since 2010, have pursued. However, here too, as the director of the Political Economy Research Institute at Sheffield University conjectures,

in politics change often begins at the bottom and forces its way to the political surface. Possibly, just possibly, the British people in their apparently contradictory reactions to the crisis are now signalling that they have had enough of neoliberalism and want something that actually delivers to their aspirations and needs.⁹

Indeed, although the general election in May 2015 saw the Conservatives narrowly remain in power, the subsequent landslide vote for anti-austerity, democratic socialist Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the opposition Labour Party is indicative of a grass-roots call for change.

That neoliberalism has failed to meet the ‘aspirations and needs’ of young women, those who, as Cochrane puts it, ‘grew up being told the world was post-feminist, that sexism and misogyny were over, and feminists should pack up their placards’, is now corroborated by the numerous instances of them picking up ‘their placards’, organizing campaigns, or protesting via social media, against sexism, pornography, rape and racism.¹⁰ Their support is vital to recovering the momentum of feminism as a movement: to the ‘doing’ rather than ‘undoing’ of feminism. Since, as Fraser observes, ‘the rise of neoliberalism’ occasioned feminism’s ‘resignification’ in the guise of the individualistic, self-empowered woman – feminism’s ‘rogue’, ‘uncanny double’ – the current ‘possible shift away from neoliberalism’ is a propitious moment in which feminism might be re-signified through a renewal of ‘the emancipatory promise of second-wave feminism’.¹¹ In other words, the recognition, especially on the part of younger, ‘post-feminist’ generations, that a ‘shift away from’ and alternative to neoliberalism is urgently needed in the interests of socially progressive change affords an opportunity to revisit and revitalize feminism’s emancipatory aspirations and goals.

Where feminism’s rejuvenation is one critical concern, another matter is the question of theatre’s political agency. The difficulty, if not seeming impossibility, of cracking open neoliberalism has occasioned intense scrutiny about the critical role of the arts. There are those who, like Jodi Dean, view the arts as a distraction from ‘political struggles’, while others, such as Mouffe, are of the view that the arts have an important role ‘in making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’.¹² More specifically in terms of performance, theatre’s adjectival attachments to ‘the political’ as fostered by a leftish, twentieth-century, political-theatre tradition have been widely contested by some and rejected outright by others. Theatre’s capacity to act politically has been perceived to be as diminished as the ideological (broadly socialist) ground in which it took root. As Janelle Reinelt observes, ‘The debate about the value and

indeed the definition of “political theatre” has seen a ‘turning away from a discredited “identity politics” to a preference for participatory, non-didactic postdramatic theatre’.¹³ In her seminal essay ‘Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship’, she elaborates on how the discrediting of identity politics diminishes the focus on ‘matters of race, class, gender and sexuality in performance’, and examines the way in which the ‘extremely influential discourse of postdramatic theatre’ has occasioned ‘shifting attention away from any direct connection between theatre and political life outside the theatre’ in favour of ‘turning attention inward to the processes of the theatrical apparatus itself and its internal politics’.¹⁴ While identity politics always needs to be revisited and the terms of its thinking renegotiated, its discrediting is arguably harmful to the erasure of identity-marked inequalities and differences.¹⁵ Equally, the privileging of the ‘participatory, non-didactic postdramatic’ over politically marked theatre, if not all other kinds of theatre, risks eliding consideration of the myriad ways in which theatre might help to make visible the cracks in neoliberalism’s armour.

Hence, to borrow from Mouffe, I am arguing for critical attention to a ‘plurality of forms of artistic [performance] intervention’, and advocating an approach that posits theatre’s heterogeneously formed sites of opposition to neoliberalism as a ‘network of resistance’.¹⁶ To conceive of ‘counter-hegemonic’ performances as a ‘network of resistance’ is to think of theatre’s manifold, resistant sites as links in a chain agitating for change to the neoliberal hegemony. This eschews the difficulty of attributing the burden of resistance to any one particular form and conceives the making of political subjectivities as occurring across multiple sites of potential emancipatory possibility.¹⁷

While constitutive of multiple sites that may assist with dissent from neoliberalism, theatre as a ‘network of resistance’ cannot in and of itself, however, dismantle the dominant hegemony. At once a reminder of Mouffe’s point that a ‘vast chain of equivalences’ is needed to challenge neoliberalism, in another, related way, this also directs attention to acknowledging theatre as a link in, or as linked into, other chains of interconnecting social and cultural communication. As Reinelt argues, theatre operates as a ‘communication node within a network of highly varied and sometimes contradictory nodes that together make up public discourse’. It has the potential to ‘modify or challenge, or possibly even sometimes support, other information or modes of knowing that are addressing the polity’.¹⁸ In sum, theatre need not be seen as acting alone in the political arena, but as intersecting with other circuits and activities producing ‘counter-hegemonic’ knowledge, as will shortly be exemplified in my analysis of Lucy Kirkwood’s *NSFW* and its links with Lucy Bates’s *Everyday Sexism* project.

In addition to observing this ‘counter-hegemonic’ circuitry, it is important to clarify that resistance need not be defined or thought purely in terms of opposition (that which we are against), but also in terms of affirmation (that which we are for). In other words, agitating for change requires not only oppositional strategies, but also reparative tactics to help envision the remaking of an alternative, socially progressive hegemony. Equally, as will become clear in my commentary on *One Billion Rising*, reparative strategies are arguably vital to carrying on within the political arrangement as is. For when people are calling for change to a regime that has failed to deliver or is in some way acting improperly in respect of so-called democracy, this requires both imagining and working towards a

systemic change that is not yet, while at the same time surviving the here-and-now conditions of a sociopolitical given.¹⁹

As previously stated, under neoliberalism systemic change of the socially democratic kind has been difficult to imagine. As McRobbie outlines, a key impediment to envisioning an alternative is the erasure of details of historically significant efforts to bring about democratic change from cultural memory.²⁰ Thus my third and final case study, *Made in Dagenham*, with its reprise of the 1968 strike that made feminist history, attests to the politically reparative remembering of past struggles as an important element in the ‘network of resistance’.

In sum, with their own amalgam of dissensual and reparative practices, ‘counter-hegemonic’ performances conceived as a ‘network of resistance’ have the potential to play their supportive part in agitating for change.²¹ By way of consolidating and illustrating my claim, I move next to the three performances as links in a chain of feminist resistance to neoliberalism, each of which contributes to feminism’s re-resignification as an emancipatory politics.

NSFW and Everyday Sexism

Kirkwood’s *NSFW* premiered in 2012 at London’s Royal Court Theatre, England’s foremost venue for new playwriting and the acknowledged artistic home for many dramatists sympathetic or committed to the left. Thus the play is situated within the political-theatre tradition that, as previously explained, has come under increasing scrutiny, if not critique. It is a tradition that, as *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington argues, ‘ebbs and flows’.²² Perceiving the tradition to be ‘resurgent right now’, Billington attributes this to key factors that include: a tradition for younger generations of writers to draw on, support from those in charge of venues who recognize ‘an obligation [for theatre] to act as a forum for debate’, and audiences with an appetite for engaging with urgent contemporary issues.²³ Significantly, given my earlier remarks about theatre as linked into other systems of cultural communication, Billington observes both ‘the prevailing discontent with current political discourse’ and the media’s frequent failure ‘to grapple with existing realities’ as working very much to theatre’s communicative advantage.²⁴ In his view, such conditions obviate the idea of theatre being ‘elitist and out of touch’ and are conducive to its capacity to express what Sydney Newman, former head of BBC drama, termed ‘agitational contemporaneity’ – the need for ‘raw data and provocative debate about the society we inhabit’.²⁵

Kirkwood’s title signals the idea that the play was written to provoke. ‘NSFW’ stands for ‘Not Safe for Work’, meaning online material that someone would not want to be seen viewing in a public place such as an office. The drama is set in the offices of two magazines: the lad’s-styled magazine *Doghouse*, which, as the title suggests, espouses a sexist, page-3 culture (‘*topless photo shoots on the walls*’²⁶); the other is *Electra*, a magazine whose target readership is that of an affluent, *Sex and the City* class of women. Both are complicit in endorsing an objectifying, pornographic view of women. Amidst her keenly observed and darkly comic treatment of the magazines’ relatively privileged, middle-class workforce whose positions are nonetheless precarious given the scarcity of employment,

Kirkwood highlights an issue that is fundamental to my feminist ‘network of resistance’: the making and unmaking of women’s relationship with feminism. Two flashpoints from the play serve to illustrate this matter.

The first comes in the play’s denouement, which critiques the resignification of feminism along neoliberal lines. The play ends with Miranda, the boss of *Electra*, getting ready for a come-as-your-heroine office party. A high-flying, female executive, Miranda epitomizes the brand of ‘glamorous individuality’ that she sells to her readership.²⁷ With her is the unemployed Sam, the most socially and materially disadvantaged character in the play: a former employee of *Doghouse*, dismissed after unknowingly selecting an underage winner for the magazine’s ‘Local Lovely’ competition, now seeking employment with *Electra*. While Sam reluctantly completes an interview test that consists of marking up imperfections on screenshots of glamorous women, Miranda completes her transformation into her chosen heroine. As she dresses up as a fashionable Edwardian lady, the character of her masquerade is uncertain. It only becomes clear when she completes her transformation with a sash in the colours of green, purple and white: the suffragette colours of Emmeline Pankhurst’s militant Women’s Social and Political Union. Putting on the sash she delivers the final line of the play: ‘This is exactly what I asked for’.²⁸

This is the image that has lingered most in my memory of the play in production,²⁹ arguably because it elicits the discomfiting thought that while this is not what feminists asked for, feminism’s ‘rogue’ double that Miranda embodies is what we have got. Cloaked in the mantle of suffrage, Miranda signifies a false ‘chain of equivalences’ between the struggle for women’s enfranchisement and the empowerment of the high-achieving, individual woman trading in feminine perfection. Feminism’s history of activism directed towards greater equality is, therefore, shorn of its socially progressive, emancipatory promise. In other words, this is a painful reminder that, when feminism’s discourse is appropriated and in turn occupied by the very forces it seeks to overcome, then the always and already fragile project of resistance (fragile since it begins from a position of relative weakness within the hegemonic order) is liable to fracture, susceptible to a failure to regroup and to keep on keeping on with goals still yet to be realized.

Sonia Kruks argues that the making and unmaking of women’s relationship with feminism, as gestured to in Kirkwood’s image, can be understood by adopting the distinction that Sartre makes between ‘collectives’ and ‘groups’.³⁰ Collectives are ‘practical ensembles’ wherein the individual praxes of members give rise to an unintentional ‘joint result’, and the field in which the ‘multiplicity of praxes take place is generally shaped by scarcities of various kinds’.³¹ A case in point would be the middle-class office workers in Kirkwood’s play whose precarity in the labour market makes for competitive relations. Their employment in a ‘field of scarcity’ produces the collective ‘joint result’ of the workforce: signing up to low-paid magazine journalism in turn demands their cooperation with the cultural production of a sexist culture. By contrast, groups ‘involve organized and conscious nodes of resistance of various kinds’; hence feminist groups are those resistant to the ‘passively mediated ensembles that constitute “women”’.³² While Kruks observes the formation of ‘intentionally created, goal-directed’ feminist groups to

challenge ‘passively mediated ensembles’ of women, she also notes how these often fall apart, citing the example of the dismantling of feminism as a social movement after the vote was won.³³ Thus the urgent question is: how is it that women may come to dissent from the ‘collective’ in favour of the ‘group’, or the regrouping of feminism?

Furthering the general observations made in my opening remarks about feminism’s rejuvenation, I want here to press an additional point that concerns the idea of individual resistance giving rise to group action. While there is precious little in *NSFW* by way of the characters’ dissent from the endorsement of a sexist culture given the precarity of the workforce as a ‘collective’, it is nonetheless briefly glimpsed through a story narrated by Sam shortly before the play’s ending. This is my second flashpoint from Kirkwood’s play, flashpoint being the operative word since it is the story Sam tells to an indifferent Miranda about his ex-girlfriend’s public shaming of a flasher on the London Tube. It relates how she got everyone in the carriage to take note of what was happening by shouting ‘Look at his chipolata!’ and to join her in that shaming by chorusing: ‘Chipolata! Chipolata!’³⁴ This is a telling, hopeful moment that counterpoints the play’s previous two *Doghouse* scenes, which follow an attempt by the father of the fourteen-year-old winner of the ‘Local Lovely’ competition to sue the magazine. Since the editor buys the father off and two employees, including Sam, lose their jobs, it feels as though opposition to the production and consumption of women’s objectification is futile. By contrast, Sam’s personal tale of one woman standing up to sexism shows that ‘[p]eople can stand up and stop shit things happening’, as he puts it. It is the ‘first time in [his] life’ that he is able to feel that he is ‘part of something, like we, people, together, can change things’.³⁵ In its disarticulation of the way things are and expression of ‘all the things the world could be’, the story unsettles the idea that change is inconceivable.³⁶ Juxtaposed with Miranda’s masquerade, it reveals a critical dissonance between women being complicit in the upholding of a sexist status quo and finding solidarity with others in resisting misogynist behaviour.

During the six months prior to *NSFW*’s premiere in October of 2012, the idea of individual women standing up to a sexist culture and making public their personal stories of misogynist behaviour gained prominence through Laura Bates’s Everyday Sexism initiative – a website where women could post accounts of their lived experience of sexism. A personal tipping point – that unaccountable moment in which one too many experiences shifts the balance from compliance to resistance – is how, in popular terms, Bates accounts for her own desire to test the theory of women’s equality and what occasioned her to launch the project.³⁷

Given the withholding of information necessary for people ‘to make an informed choice about whether to come out in favor of change’, as Andrew J. Nathan elucidates, there is no way of knowing if the balance has really tipped; nor is there a way of accounting for why one event rather than another has the capacity to ‘trigger . . . a new group of citizens, still a minority, to reveal publicly their dissatisfaction with the status quo’.³⁸ As a ‘trigger’ for releasing women’s dissatisfaction with a sexist status quo and for women to educate themselves and each other about a spectrum of sexism stretching from everyday harassment to violent abuse and rape, Bates’s project surely counts as a success story, one that signals that the balance may indeed have tipped.³⁹ But equally, I would add, one

should not discount the ripple effect of the multiple events and cultural communicative systems of knowing that afford, however tiny, a ‘crack in the culture of complicity’.⁴⁰ And that includes acknowledging the capacities of plays such as *NSFW* that in the British political-theatre tradition have the capacity to express ‘agitational contemporaneity’.

One Billion Rising: ‘intersectionality in action’

While *NSFW* brings a critique of feminism’s neoliberal, ‘uncanny double’ to the network I am assembling here, my next link in the chain of feminist-theatre resistance, Eve Ensler’s One Billion Rising campaign, exemplifies feminism’s ‘goal-directed’ regrouping as a movement committed to ending violence against women. This campaign has followed in the wake of Ensler’s V-Day movement based on her solo show *The Vagina Monologues* (1996). Since 14 February (Valentine’s Day) 1998, the monologues have been performed around the world as a fund-raising vehicle for organizations working to stop violence against women. One Billion Rising built on the V-Day initiative by campaigning for 14 February 2013 to be the day on which one billion people would rise up and dance in countries across the globe to demand an end to violence that statistically affects one in three women worldwide.⁴¹ This flash-mob-styled protest has become an annual Valentine’s Day event: One Billion Rising for Justice followed in 2014 and One Billion Rising for Revolution in 2015.

The One Billion movement may be global, but I should point out that my own interest in the campaign has been very much rooted in the local: it began out of curiosity about my own students’ involvement in this initiative. Moreover, since I have voiced criticism of Ensler’s cultural-feminist essentializing of ‘talking vaginas’ (an objection that certainly persists in terms of how some critics and activists view the One Billion project), something of a critical adjustment on my part is necessary to approach this campaign.⁴² This is not least because in contrast to the earlier concerns I have had about the risk of failing to hear the differences between women in a universalizing vagina-‘speak’, One Billion appears to exemplify feminism rising through a broad-based constituency in a way that allows for differentiated sites of participatory resistance to forge links with each other.

Supporters of One Billion, such as critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, attest to the potential the campaign has to allow for different groups (in Kruks’s sense) to connect up. Crenshaw describes the protest as a means to ‘bring people . . . into political spaces, with a broader capacity to see how their issues are connected’, and to open ‘the space for people themselves to find their way in and say “this is resonant for me”’. She summarizes the movement as exemplifying ‘intersectionality in action’.⁴³ Pioneered by Crenshaw, intersectionality has developed as a seminal, theoretical framework within feminist thinking to posit how the inequality of ‘women’ is not uniformly shaped but conditioned by multiple, overlapping differentiations such as class, race, gender or sexuality. Exemplifying intersectionality in practice, One Billion evinces a ‘vast [feminist] chain of equivalences’ as groups rise up in response to local, culturally specific matrices of oppression and link up with the common, ‘goal-directed’ purpose of seeing an end to violence against women.

That said, as I have already hinted, the campaign does have its critics: ‘insulting’ and ‘neo-colonialist’ in the eyes of some women outside white, Western privilege; a waste of time and money that would be better spent on grass-roots activism in the views of others, since a one-day dance event will not bring about change on the ground, nor alleviate the suffering of victims of violence.⁴⁴ So what is it that *performing* an end to violence through dances, human chains and placard-strewn protests around the world can ‘do’?

Where articulating ‘agitational contemporaneity’ is the purview of the political-theatre tradition, a performative-political act of street theatre such as One Billion proceeds not by ‘provocative debate’ but through a critical sensing of pre-existing, already felt dissatisfaction.⁴⁵ What occupies the agora where the flash mobs take place, such as the town square in my home city of Lancaster, is not reasoned debate but the yearning for a different ‘story’ that is felt, told and realized through the affective energies of those who come to dance and those who gather to watch.

Like many of the One Billion flash mobs across the globe, the ‘Lancaster Rising’ group of participants adopted the campaign’s anthem ‘Break the Chain’ and choreographer Debbie Allen’s dance routine. The music, lyrics and choreography are upbeat, calling on women’s collective strength as a resource for fighting back against violence, instead of living in fear and a state of victimization. Movement sequences are defiant and joyous: outstretched arms and hands with outward-facing palms make ‘stop’ signs; raised knees move downwards in a chain-breaking gesture; arms wave and bodies bounce in ‘party’ mode; and in the finale, raised arms point upwards as a sign of women rising up against oppression.⁴⁶ My overriding impression of ‘Lancaster Rising’ was of dancing bodies occupying the square and oscillating between the dissensual (opposition to persistent violence against women) and the reparative (the reclaiming of women’s bodies as liberated from oppression).⁴⁷ Exuberant, playful and uplifting, the routine was at its most affective when participants evinced palpable signs of rising energy (throwing themselves into the moves), pleasure (beaming smiles and laughter), and solidarity (a spontaneous ‘rugby scrum’ after the dance) (Fig. 1).

These One Billion flash mob performances have no direct political impact, but as theatrically realized sites of reparative imagining in which the world is fleetingly remade as a not-yet world without violence, their energies transmit the longing for a different way of belonging in the world. To put this another way, if, in the view of some grass-roots activists, these dances are surplus to requirements on account of their lack of causal effect, it is by virtue of what Eve Sedgwick would call their ‘surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment’, their ‘additive’, reparative address of a culture that fails to satisfy, sustain or nurture, that the efficacy of their affectively realized longing to belong differently lies.⁴⁸

‘The affective dimension’ is, Mouffe observes, a ‘crucial element’ in the ‘process of identification’ and the making of communities.⁴⁹ Thus the ‘affective dimension’ of longing to belong to or identify with a feminism that negates its neoliberal double and reaffirms political ideals and praxes that are ‘anti-hierarchical, participatory and demotic’ is vital to recovering a sense of feminism whose work is not over or redundant, but still to be worked for.⁵⁰ While the millennial backlash against feminism saw many



FIG. 1 (Colour online) 'Lancaster Rising' flash mob participants perform Debbie Allen's choreography to 'Break the Chain' in Lancaster's town square. Photograph courtesy of The Vagina MonoLancs.

women struggling to identify with the 'f-word', there was comparatively little difficulty in identifying with the 'v-word' as the involvement of my own students, or the sheer numbers involved in One Billion as the latest chapter in V-Day campaigning attests. Since One Billion appears to make resonant an affective solidarity between women in multiple sites and countries, it affords an opportunity for identifications to undergo a shift, to change.⁵¹ Thus, aside from the affirmation and support this event brings to those on the ground already committed to working towards an end to violence against women, the potential of the flash mob also arguably lies in the affectively realized, unknowable, unpredictable changes that may occur within and between those involved in the desire to 'break the chain'. In other words, there are those who, when the dancing is over but the affective sensibilities of longing to belong differently linger, may experience themselves as wanting to find another way to act in the world at large, where the word for that new way of acting and belonging is feminism.

While the 'affective dimension' of the flash mob affords no guarantee in respect of affectively realized feminist identities, One Billion nonetheless exemplifies the necessity for opportunities conducive to assisting with the making of feminist political subjectivities. In the UK specifically, where the rise of neoliberalism saw a reduction in the cultural resources available to communicate 'counter-hegemonic' information, the need for such sites is critical.⁵² Hence my optimistic, albeit speculative, view that to dance in support of the end to violence against women may also potentially mean taking a solidarity-making step towards socially progressive forms of feminism.

***Made in Dagenham*: the reparative remembering of an activist past**

In coming to my final link in this chain of networked feminist resistance and thus to a conclusion, I return to the West End musical *Made in Dagenham*, which headlined my opening remarks. Commercial theatre either has tended to be deemed unworthy of serious academic attention, or has been heavily criticized as complicit in capitalist production and consumption.⁵³ However, in the context of understanding the popular feminisms formed as a flow of communication between performers and audiences across a range of theatrical genres and performances, together with Geraldine Harris I have sought to make the case for including rather than discounting the mainstream.⁵⁴ Equally, in the heterogeneous combination of work considered here as constitutive of a ‘network of resistance’, as a musical that ‘entertains feminism’, *Made in Dagenham* can be brought alongside my examples from the political- and activist-theatre traditions as another site that might assist with the ‘doing’ rather than ‘undoing’ of feminism.

The musical, which opened in November 2014 at the Adelphi Theatre in the Strand, London, and ran for five months, is based on a 2010 British film about the Dagenham women’s strike, starring Sally Hawkins as the housewife-factory-worker-turned-activist Rita O’Grady. Alongside the movie and the musical, an online educational resource about the film aimed at high-school students, and the journalism and social media dedicated to discussing *Made in Dagenham*, created extensive circuits of cultural communication that served to revive the women’s strike action in the popular imagination. Given my observation about the need for the dissemination of ‘counter-hegemonic’ information, this transmission of a landmark event in the history of British feminism represents a valuable cultural resource for the politically reparative remembering (rather than the hegemonic forgetting) of previous struggles, one which allows for genealogical connections to be made between past and present feminist activism.

The musical proceeds by establishing the women’s dual role as factory workers and housewives, and introduces the grievance that led to the strike – the refusal on the part of management to recognize the women’s labour machining covers for the car seats as skilled work. It follows the strike action through to its parliamentary conclusion as the women from Ford meet with Barbara Castle (Sophie-Louise Dann), then Secretary of State for Employment, who backed their claim.⁵⁵ The chorus-line convention serves as a perfect vehicle for creating the assembly lines in Ford’s factory (Fig. 2), and although, in accordance with Euro-American musical-theatre tradition, the show has its star (film actress Gemma Arterton took the part of Rita), it is the *group* of women that forms through a growing awareness of their unequal pay conditions and their decision to act in solidarity with each other that drives the energy of the production and is central to the flow of popular-feminist communication.

Feminism’s emancipatory discourse is writ large in the musical episodes – in the women’s demand for equal pay, in their stand against the male workers and union bosses reluctant to take their side, and as they kick back against the ‘everyday sexism’ that characterizes their work and domestic lives. Since it is the women who call for strike action, identity politics are woven together with a socialist–feminist concern for the material conditions of life on the factory floor. These are given visual emphasis in Bunny



FIG. 2 (Colour online) Women machinists in *Made in Dagenham*. Photograph courtesy of Manuel Harlan.

Christie's set design, where domestic interiors are constructed out of the mechanical parts of the factory, and lines of suspended car chairs repeatedly traverse the stage. Equally, the British Parliament shadows the demand for change – comic cameos of the Labour prime minister Harold Wilson (Mark Hadfield) trying to fathom what do with these troublesome women are staged against the towering clock face of Big Ben. In other words, the 'redistribution [economics], recognition [culture] and representation [politics]' that fragmented after the second wave of feminism, as Fraser observes, are reassembled through the course of the musical.⁵⁶

It is inevitably the case that this reparative act of reassembling feminism's radical past runs the risk of a nostalgic, sentimental longing for what was, or, worse still, for what threatens to relegate feminism to the past tense. Yet since now is a time when renewed attentions to feminism are gaining momentum, the terms on which women previously agitated for change to their domestic, reproductive and working lives are traces that remain open – through, in this case, a musical – to observation and interpretation. These are a means to understand how feminism might be pieced together again. And it may just prove to be the case that the assemblage of previously held feminist concerns, as per Fraser's taxonomy, holds the key to how feminism in the UK might be reconstituted in the future.⁵⁷

Past and present palpably and viscerally connect in *Made in Dagenham* in the idea that change remains in the future tense. As the lyrics of the musical's final number put it, 'Women are still being asked to make do, to wait until tomorrow, but when is tomorrow? Ten years? Twenty years? Fifty years? . . . If not now, when?'⁵⁸ 'Stand up, Stand up' is

Rita's repeated refrain as she addresses the all-male assembly of trade unionists seated upstage behind her. As she faces, and speaks and sings directly to, the theatre's spectators, the heightened affectivity of this closing moment is such that the audience, virtually in its entirety, gets to its feet. It is a transitory utopian gesture. There is no indicator to affirm that standing up for women's rights is what anyone will do once they leave the auditorium. And yet it is probably the one and only time in my theatre-going life that I will experience a West End audience entertaining the idea of standing up for women's rights. Moreover, it is hard not to feel that there will have been some who came away from the show feeling 'this is resonant for me'.

Standing up for feminism

Standing up for feminism as a socially progressive force for change characterizes all three pieces in the network I have assembled over the course of this article. Artistically and politically each affords a radically different link in a chain of resistance: political theatre's engagement with feminism's 'uncanny double' (*NSFW*), the activist flash mob directed at ending violence against women (*One Billion*), and the musical's reprise of disputes over women's unequal pay (*Made in Dagenham*). To think of these works not in isolation from each other, but beside each other as heterogeneously formed, intersecting sites of emancipatory possibility is paradigmatic of my overarching claim to how we might conceive of theatre's multiple, 'counter-hegemonic' performances as a resistant network lending its support to agitating for change. Moreover, my networked approach also reflects how this chain of feminism and theatre resistance links to other systems of 'counter-hegemonic' communication and/or sites of activism – *NSFW* in dialogue with Bates's *Everyday Sexism* project; *One Billion*'s attachments to grass-roots, activist organizations; the musical's intersection with the *Mind the Pay Gap* campaign and its online dissemination of information about the gender pay gap. Thus my contention is that theatre's 'network of resistance' does not act or stand alone but works alongside and in tandem with multiple circuits of dissent, each of which, on its own terms and in its own right, is looking to 'break the chain' of neoliberalism.

If feminist energies are gaining momentum; if the balance has tipped against feminism's neoliberal double, as campaigns such as *One Billion* or *Everyday Sexism* appear to suggest; and if there is a will to stand up and to feel part of something and to 'stop shit things happening', then for the feminist critic to devote her labour to tracing the cracks that theatre makes in the neoliberal system, however tiny or fragile, to understand how they form, resonate and link up, is also to play a supporting role in this 'network of resistance'.

NOTES

- 1 Statistics show that women in the UK receive roughly eighty pence to every pound earned by men. The pay gap is wider than this among the lowest-paid groups of women. See Jane Bruton, 'Enough Is Enough: Why We all Need to Stand up to the Gender Pay Gap', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2014, at <http://www.theguardian.com/women-in-leadership/2014/sep/01/gender-pay-gap-grazia-equal-pay-campaign>, accessed 6 September 2015. The campaign was spearheaded by *Grazia* magazine, whose readers petitioned Parliament in their 'thousands'. See Zoe Beaty, 'Breaking News: We Won Our #

- EqualPay Campaign!’, at www.graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/shopping/equal-pay-transparency-grazia-campaign-20150336745, accessed 6 September 2015.
- 2 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 95.
 - 3 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009). See in particular Chapter 2, ‘Feminism Undone? The Cultural Politics of Disarticulation’, pp. 24–53.
 - 4 For a detailed overview and contextualization of these shifts see *ibid.*
 - 5 Kira Cochrane, ‘The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 2013, at www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/fourth-wave-feminism-rebel-women, accessed 22 May 2015.
 - 6 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 133.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
 - 8 Nancy Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, *New Left Review*, 56 (March–April 2009), pp. 97–117, here pp. 113–14.
 - 9 Tony Payne, ‘Is Neoliberalism at Last Unravelling in Britain?’ *SPERI Comment*, 5 November 2014, at <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2014/11/05/neoliberalism-unravelling-britain>, accessed 22 May 2015.
 - 10 Kira Cochrane, ‘The Fourth Wave of Feminism’. Cochrane offers a useful survey of the variety of campaign initiatives.
 - 11 Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, pp. 108, 114, 116.
 - 12 Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 13; Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 93.
 - 13 Janelle Reinelt, ‘Generational Shifts’, *Theatre Research International*, 35, 3 (October 2010), pp. 288–90, here pp. 289–90.
 - 14 Janelle Reinelt, ‘Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship’, in Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 34–50, here p. 35.
 - 15 For an insightful, feminist revisiting of identity politics see Elin Diamond *et al.*, ‘Identity Politics Forum’, *Theatre Research International*, 37, 1 (March 2012), pp. 63–82.
 - 16 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, pp. 94–5. Mouffe’s own discussion focuses on the ‘counter-hegemonic interventions’ of the artist Alfredo Jaar.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 94. My observation about the making of political subjectivities across multiple forms is in accord with and influenced by Jacques Rancière’s idea of the emancipated spectator. See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011; first published 2009).
 - 18 Reinelt, *Crossroads of Citizenship*, pp. 48–9, p. 43. Reinelt’s observations are situated within a critical framework that draws on Étienne Balibar’s ‘worksites of democracy’ to postulate ‘theatre as a democratic worksite’. This highly insightful model is a cognate way of thinking about how theatre acts politically.
 - 19 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose Kleinian-based discussion of reparative processes has influenced my thinking in this regard, argues that coping necessitates ‘the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them’. Thus attending to the reparative processes by which ‘selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them’ – is an important consideration, not least since reparative attachments to objects that fail to sustain also mark the oscillation between the given and the present desire for that which is not yet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 137, 150–1.
 - 20 See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 49.
 - 21 Where Sedgwick is a seminal influence on my thinking about the reparative, it is Rancière’s notion of dissensus that shadows my thoughts on the practice of dissent. See Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, pp. 48–9.
 - 22 Michael Billington, ‘Speaking Truth to Power: The Rebirth of Political Theatre’, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2014, p. 45.

- 23 Ibid. One other matter that Billington comments on is cultural specificity: the claims that he makes
 24 obtain for the British tradition of political theatre, but may not be applicable in other national contexts.
 25 Ibid.
- 26 Lucy Kirkwood, *NSFW* (London: Nick Hern Books Ltd, 2012), p. 3. Page 3 is so termed because of the
 tradition of *The Sun*, a popular tabloid daily, for printing photographs of topless models on its third
 page. Starting in 1970 (ironically the same year as the Equal Pay Act), the Page 3 feature ceased in 2015 in
 the wake of feminist campaigns such as No More Page 3. Equally, feminist initiatives like the Lose the
 Lads Mags have been influential in bringing about the closure of the magazines *Nuts* and *Loaded*.
- 27 McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 125.
- 28 Kirkwood, *NSFW*, p. 79.
- 29 Elsewhere I have written a detailed commentary on the play that begins with this image. See Elaine
 Aston, 'Room for Realism?', in Siân Adishesiah and Louise LePage, eds., *Twenty-First Century Drama:
 What Happens Now* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming, 2016).
- 30 Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY:
 Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 120–3.
- 31 Ibid., p. 121.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 122–3. In *NSFW* there is mention of such a group: the upwardly mobile Charlotte, an
 employee of *Doghouse* and the only other woman in the cast, is a member of a feminist group, but she
 feels forced to lie about her professional identity and tells her group that she works for an estate agent
 rather than a men's magazine.
- 33 Ibid., p. 123.
- 34 Kirkwood, *NSFW*, p. 72.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Laura Bates, 'Introduction: Everybody Has a Tipping Point', in Bates, *Everyday Sexism* (London: Simon
 & Schuster 2014), pp. 10–19.
- 38 Andrew J. Nathan, 'Foreseeing the Unforeseeable', *Journal of Democracy*, 24, 1 (January 2013), pp. 20–5,
 here p. 21.
- 39 Aside from making public and visible the issue of sexism, one tangible benefit of Bates's initiative has
 been the advice her project was able to offer the British Transport Police (BTP) in dealing with sexual
 harassment and assault on London's public transport system. In 2013 the BTP launched Project
 Guardian to detect and redress the kind of unwanted sexual attention on the London underground that
 Kirkwood represents in *NSFW*.
- 40 Bates, *Everyday Sexism*, p. 176.
- 41 See What Is One Billion Rising?, at www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/one-billion-rising,
 accessed 20 July 2015.
- 42 For my critical view of 'talking vaginas' see Elaine Aston, 'A Good Night out, for the Girls', in Rebecca
 d'Monté and Graham Saunders, eds., *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Basingstoke:
 Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 114–30, esp. pp. 117–21.
- 43 Quoted in Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women* (Guardian Shorts, 2013), e-book, n.p.
- 44 For a digest of the criticisms see Natalie Gyte, 'Why I Won't Support One Billion Rising', *Huffington
 Post*, 14 February 2013, at [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/natalie-gyte/one-billion-rising-why-i-wont-
 support_b_2684595.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/natalie-gyte/one-billion-rising-why-i-wont-support_b_2684595.html), accessed 28 May 2015.
- 45 This point is made by John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 78, in his
 discussion of the Zapatistas and the importance he attributes to street theatre as being able 'to touch
 discontents that are already there'.
- 46 The step-by-step instructions for Allen's choreography can be viewed at
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRUixmBwUeA, accessed 11 September 2015.

- 47 'Lancaster Rising' can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAP1HHhjXHE, accessed 9 September 2015.
- 48 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 149–150. See also note 19 above.
- 49 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 46.
- 50 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 105.
- 51 I use affective solidarity in the sense that Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, p. 154, advises and argues: solidarity shaped by the elicitation of an embodied, affectively realized, 'respectful recognition' between different women. This couples with her reflections on group and collectively formed identities to posit both the exteriority of the social that conditions identity formation, and the interior, sentient ways by which 'women may come to know each other's experiences and act as groups' (*ibid.*, p. 128).
- 52 See McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 49.
- 53 For examples see Baz Kershaw, 'The Limits of Theatre', in Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 29–56; and Dan Rebellato, 'McTheatre', in Rebellato, *Theatre & Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 39–46.
- 54 See Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *A Good Night out for the Girls: Popular Feminisms in Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 55 With Castle's intervention, the women were successful in so far as they were awarded a higher wage, but this still fell short of equal pay. For details see Becky Crocker, 'The Real Story of Made in Dagenham', *Worker's Liberty*, 14 July 2008, at www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/07/14/real-story-made-dagenham, accessed 20 July 2015.
- 56 Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 116.
- 57 Although too early to be clear about feminism's future agenda, there are embryonic signs of the various women's campaigns for social justice putting pressure on the state (Parliament) in their advocacy for change, unlike some other activist groups who favour a 'withdrawal from' rather than 'engagement with' institutions (Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 109). While predominantly concerned with body politics, feminist activism in the UK also encompasses an economic goal, as evidenced by the Mind the Pay Gap campaign, hence my observation regarding the potential applicability and relevance of Fraser's three-way taxonomy.
- 58 Stand Up – *Made in Dagenham* the Musical, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXNj9T_ykw70, accessed 5 October 2015.

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