

Motherhood In Theatre: On Stage and Off Stage and in Theatrical Portrayals

2955 Words

Introduction

This essay explores motherhood and the theatre. It looks at the way mothers are portrayed on stage, and the experience of being a mother who works in theatre. The reason for selecting this area of research is that my final piece is a musical cabaret, telling mothers' stories using songs and comedy. Because of the nature of my own work – comedy and tragic songs at the piano, with character-led performances – I have mainly concentrated on 'funny women'. But my work also goes to dark places, such as rape and miscarriage, and so I also consider motherhood in performance, in works by performers who do not necessarily consider themselves funny.

Early Influences

Entertaining audiences from the piano, in a theatre, has its roots in music hall, and my work is similar to this style. My piece was created as part of my final module at Northumbria University on the MA in Theatre and Performance. The brief was to create a piece of work that sits alongside contemporary theatre. However, as Oddey (1999, p.5) writes, 'Victoria Wood is, in her use of song, her Northern accent, and her jolly-sister persona a throwback to music hall' – and so I feel I can briefly mention this influence. I had many comments about being 'similar to Victoria Wood' in my evaluation sheets from the audience (see Appendix 1), and I regard Victoria Wood as a key influence. As Keyssar (1996, p.1) writes, 'In the early eighties, feminist theatre was an emergent cultural form', and all of my reference points, except to briefly mention music hall, are post-1980s.

During early music hall performance, women such as Marie Lloyd would entertain audiences by performing in character, which is how I work. Female performers were regularly seen as either prostitutes or 'performing for men's pleasure' (Oddey 1999, quoting Grey, p.5). These two factors still spur on female performers today, to prove they are not doing this, as I will explore in the main body of this essay. On the

subject of motherhood in theatre, Davis (1991, p.99) observes that 'as working mothers and wives (but not necessarily both), they threatened traditional family structures, the balance of economic power...', going on to note that 'if [a female performer] maintained her independence, guarded herself against assault, and insulated herself socially and financially, she was bound to create hostility. Her livelihood was also very fragile.'. Women performers may still feel they have a lot to prove, and juggling childcare with a life in the theatre still seems to be much more difficult for women than for men. Cusack (in Oddey 1999, p.33) puts it like this: 'I am a mother first, but I still get to the job. I cut corners in a way that a man wouldn't, and the person who always comes out worst is you. You manage the play, manage to give your child an extra half hour, and you are a neurotic mess at the end of the day because you had no time to refocus.'

Many women want to show they are not merely performing for men's pleasure and that they have every right to be on stage. While considering musicals, as my piece contains original songs, I looked at the role of the mother in *Everybody's Talking about Jamie* (2017), which goes some way towards dispelling this idea, to show that they have every right to be on stage, and are not merely performing for men's pleasure. Margaret's character is that of a strong, single mother, not looking for a partner but looking to bring up her son as fiercely and as best as she can. She supports his desire to wear high heels and dresses and has a loyal and fun friendship with her best friend, who is also a strong role model in her son's life. Also, as my piece was a solo show I looked to solo artists for inspiration. Bobby Baker, a solo theatre maker, presents her work as in no way seeking to impress men, and as demonstrating the burden of working and raising children that women often have to bear. Of her piece *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), she writes: 'I felt very strongly that the importance of the mother's role, indeed parenting as a whole, was shockingly undervalued'. Her piece is about the role of, and the difficulties faced by, the mother and is 'a commentary on domesticity, motherhood and the role of the artist'. My piece was influenced by this idea of creating something for women, exploring the three elements Baker highlights above and trying to make sense of them somehow.

Heddon (in Aston and Harris 2006, p.30), when writing about Bobby Baker's work, states that 'such works, dealing with the various "matter" of lives, matter greatly'. It was important to me that everything in my piece 'mattered'.

Including the Audience

While my own work seeks to be entertaining, in that I want the audience to enjoy themselves, I also want much more than this: to make them think, to move them, to show them the world through a new way of looking. I used evaluation forms to gather audience responses after the performance, while during the performance I was aware of the sound of laughter, the silence after a shocking moment, and also the sense throughout that I felt the audience in general to be 'on my side'. Freshwater (2009) writes of 'the tendency to confuse individual and group response' and I wanted to make sure I was respecting both.

It was also important to me that I didn't alienate people and make it only for mothers, which was reflected in some of the feedback after the show, and during rehearsal (see Appendix 2). In 2005–6 I toured with the production *Mum's The Word* (UK national tour). My own experience of this was of what Duffy (2019) referred to as 'othering' and I felt very excluded from the rest of the cast. The show was about motherhood, the actresses were mothers, and there was no acknowledgement of women who weren't mothers being just as vital. While of course this is merely anecdotal, I was very keen not to bring about similar feelings in my own audience.

The sense of 'othering' that Duffy writes about is an important part of conversations about motherhood. 'Othering' has also been brought to the table by trans women, who can feel 'othered' if they can't naturally have children. There is a real sense of mourning and grief for some childless women; as Furse (in Aston and Harris 2006, p.156) notes (about the play, *Yerma*), 'Lorca writes brilliantly about the utter despair to which the involuntarily childless are driven ... the eggs which do not fertilize into flesh of the future lie instead like time bombs exploding from inside these despairing women'. Just as there are plays about motherhood, equally there are plays about women who are not mothers and these are just as vital. I wanted my piece to acknowledge this.

Being a Mother Who Performs On Stage

On acting, Syal (in Oddey 1999, p.62) writes that motherhood ‘makes you a better performer. Motherhood opens up experiences you cannot imagine until you have done it ... suddenly you know what true altruistic love is without a shadow of a doubt. I know I could play it now in a way that I probably couldn’t have done before. You know what feeling someone’s pain on their behalf is, such a burning passionate thing and it expands you on all levels.’ Motherhood offers an empathy never known before, contributing to the toolbox of an actress, enabling compassion and sympathy that an actress may not previously have been able to access. Surely, if motherhood helps us access these positive feelings, it must also bring other emotions that may not have previously been felt so deeply either – for example, fear, protection, sorrow, despair or anger. Motherhood allows us to continually experience new emotions, which can only improve our practice as actors. Therefore, the theatre can be a creative outlet for the mother who is feeling all of these emotions. Often, however, working in the theatre can be exhausting, especially for new mothers, with late nights and potentially being away from home. The emotional guilt of being away can also be hard. Smith (2019, p.1) suggests that ‘The emotional load comes from meeting our children’s emotional needs and wanting our children to be ok – but the pressure of this and attempting to get it right can be exhausting’. In London’s West End, after months of putting her foot down, arguing and taking her employer to a tribunal, ‘A performer in musical *42nd Street* has made West End history by becoming the first to take a role on a job-share basis’ (Hemley 2018). Not only does this make sense for the actresses involved, it can only improve the performance as the actresses will be less tired and happier. It is also extremely insulting to all understudies to suggest that there can’t be two people right for a role. Hemley (2018) goes on to note that ‘The news has been hailed as a “landmark moment” by campaigning body Parents in Performing Arts, which has put job shares into its best practice charter’. Groups such as ‘Mothers Who Make’ and ‘Pregnant then Screwed’ have welcomed this news, as campaigns set up by mothers working in the arts to offer support to one another and to try to continue working in the arts while being mothers. For example, Mothers Who Make hold networking events at which they provide a creche, thereby removing the problem of finding childcare in order to find work. This is as vital as job-sharing in the

arts. Bryony Kimmings acknowledges that it is generally harder for women, and says in an interview with Sarah Bradbury (2018) that 'I wanted world domination. I used to just pack a suitcase and f*** off where I wanted to. But now I'm a single mum. I just don't think men have to deal with that as much. They can still remain the auteur, the artist touring around the world whereas I have to think about making sure we can survive as a little family.' Women are frequently the ones juggling work, home and childcare. I wanted to address this in my piece, not to alienate men but to speak to women and make them feel heard.

Portrayal of Mothers on Stage

Motherhood is brought on to the stage in many guises; from Hamlet's complex relationship with his mother to dead mothers in fairy tales, the role of the mother is one of those most discussed by theatre goers. But aside from playwrights' interpretations of motherhood, what does it really mean to be a mother on stage? In Wilson and Rankin's (2017) *Perfectly Ordinary* it is the mother who suffers most throughout the play, even though her role as the psychiatric nurse is to care for all the other characters (the patients). Stephen Sondheim portrays mothers as a mixture of witches (*Into the Woods*), nostalgic regretful characters (*Follies*) and madwomen (*Sweeney Todd*). The madness given to mothers on stage contributes to mothers not being taken seriously.

In Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* it is the mothers who are the most important characters. Their choices, their lives and ultimately their decisions lead to the creation of the story. Within the narrative the 'natural' mother is a sympathetic character: we feel sorry for her, we feel her loss when she gives away a child, and we are rooting for her. The mother who adopts is presented as a much less sympathetic character. Paranoid and uptight, her madness that grows throughout the play. The woman who can't naturally have children is portrayed as the most mad kind of woman of them all. The play also focuses on class, and the adoptive mother is middle-class, wealthy and lives in the nice part of town. Russell wanted to show the working classes in a positive light while highlighting their plight, and therefore part of his political act was to show the middle-class character almost as the enemy.

Identity is tied up in many performances. In my own piece I acknowledge that the only thing that has brought us (mothers) together is that we are all on this 'love fuelled, crazy journey' and that other than that we are 'completely different'. (Mama's Cabaret 2019)

Identity

Motherhood plays a part in identity. Simon (in Oddey 1999, p.49) always feels she has to answer 'the question of identity, as I've had to battle against my colour. For me, identity is made up of all aspects of myself as a human being.'

For women, colour, gender and class, as well as whether or not they are a mother, are all key parts of identity, as is sexuality (which I briefly touch upon in my piece). I also wanted to acknowledge that many women feel like mothers even though they may not (yet) have children, and so when I began Kim's story, I started by saying 'Kim is a mum' and going on to explain that her baby hasn't come along yet, and maybe never will. I also wanted to acknowledge women who have been pregnant but never to full term, as such 'women develop a relationship with their embryos' (Shaw in Aston and Harris 2006, p.162) and may well identify as mothers.

On identity, Stubbs (in Oddey 1999, p.41) writes that 'I have this real horror of becoming a sad person. How many actresses in their 40s can say, this is just the best thing, completely fulfilling, I could never be happier?' For me, age is a large part of my identity, and again it was important to me to present a piece of theatre that was for a slightly older audience (the over-40s). I draw attention to the character of Jessica being 40, and compare her to myself, which brings at least two characters who are 40 onto the stage.

Part of Bryony Kimmings' identity is that she suffered postnatal depression; her show *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch!* portrays this. Within this performance, the way Kimmings is viewed and how this relates to her identity is important to her. She says that 'If you see postnatal depression played out in dramas, the woman ends up killing her kid or gets sectioned. Actually postnatal mental health is part and parcel of a huge change in your life. I wanted to talk about it without making it overly dramatic. To have the

conversation about it and it be acceptable. But mostly also just to hear a woman talking about her experience and it not be reductive.’ (Bradbury 2018).

Being a Mother Off Stage

What’s the worst thing about being on tour? ‘That I can’t have the children with me’ replies Wood (in Oddey 1999, p.186). Motherhood brings with it guilt at the best of times, but being away from our children – to pursue something that makes us happy – can be among the most guilt-bringing activities. For some actresses, there is no guilt. French (in Oddey 1999, p.172), for example, assures us that ‘I don’t think there is any room for guilt about any of it: I just don’t hold with that. So many women do and that is the problem; they think they are failing. I have never felt any of that.’ But for those of us that do feel the guilt, this was something I wanted to include in my piece. In the end, within the limits of a 20-minute performance, there was no space for this, but I would like to explore it if I develop the piece.

Stubbs (in Oddey 1999, p.40) writes about being a working mum, saying that ‘I wasn’t doing any job [mum or actress] properly. I don’t think it would be a solution for me to say “I must not be an actress because I’m a mother now”. I can’t reinvent myself like that ... I would explode.’ This rings true for me. I couldn’t not be an actress because that was my identity long before I became a mother, and I also feel I can’t completely reinvent myself. But the guilt attached to *not* doing this has been difficult to deal with: as women we can feel the expectation to serve, and in particular to serve our children, and we can be made to feel guilty for pursuing any career, in particular one that makes us so happy (i.e. something just for us!).

Future

As a newly single mother of two, being a working mum is something I need to consider and take into account when making theatre work. Will it take me away from home, for example on a tour? Even without being away from home, how will I manage working evenings and weekends (and Saturday matinees)? In creating my show, I need to be aware of where and when I can perform. Do I want it to be for an international audience? Realistically, no, because I don’t want to be away from my

children for too long. Do I want it to be for a national audience? Potentially, yes, in places such as Edinburgh during the Fringe – which takes place during the summer holidays, so I could have my children with me.

My piece is fundamentally about identity: the old identity, and the new – the person you become when you become a mother. It explores age, gender and sexuality. Currently it does not touch on race or class.

Moving forward, I would like to spend more time researching my subject area so that I am not just telling my own stories from my own perspective, but can consider other people's stories and experiences.

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