Women’s engagement with drama and performance has a long tradition but it was in the 1970s that this tradition, shaped by the emergence of second-wave feminism, gained new urgency and drive, leading to an explosion of theatre and performance work by women which has continued unabated until the present. As feminist playwright Caryl Churchill has stated:

[E]ven in the spring of 1973, when a group of us were meeting to plan the first Women’s Theatre Festival (at the Almost Free Theatre in London in the autumn of 1973), we weren’t short of plays from which to choose for the three-month season. The submerged women playwrights were there – as they appear always to have been.

That feminist-inspired explosion manifested itself in a concomitant expansion of feminist publishing so that the documentation and availability of women’s theatre work, beyond the consumption of theatre as lived experience, became a real possibility: Methuen’s *Plays by Women* series (1982–94) which ran to ten volumes was but one example of this.

The period of the 1970s to the post-2000s has seen significant changes in the drama-scape in Britain, closely aligned with wider socio-economic, political, and cultural changes. Politically, there were shifts from the Left to the Right under Britain’s first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–90), to New Labour under Tony Blair (1997–2007), and to the Right again in the context of the rise of new religious fundamentalisms in the post-2000s and of a sustained economic crisis from 2008. These shifts have found their expression in changing arts policies and artistic productions. These expressions range from a significant expansion of arts venues in the 1970s and early 1980s and a concomitant rise of touring theatre companies which provided fora for the work of women playwrights, directors, and actresses alike, to later cuts in Arts Council funding that led to the disbanding of many touring companies, and to the increasing commercialization of
performance venues desperately seeking more income. These changes also, simultaneously and slowly, led to a steady increase of women in theatre in roles such as directors. Women moved from being extramural to becoming intramural so that in 2013 the Royal Court in London, the ‘writer’s theatre’ dedicated to promoting new work, appointed Vicky Featherstone as its new artistic director. A different kind of London venue, the Tricycle Theatre – renowned both for its engagement with theatre work by writers from diverse ethnic communities, and for its productions of so-called *verbatim* theatre, theatre that depicts politically sensitive material drawn from public inquiries, Royal Commissions, and other forms of public investigation – appointed Indhu Rubasingham as its artistic director in 2012. These are but two examples of the greater incorporation of women into the arts world, and specifically in theatre, since the 1970s when no such scene could be envisaged and when, indeed, intramurality was less on women’s minds than taking theatre to public spaces where it had not previously been seen, and to audiences who did not necessarily routinely attend theatre.

The 1970s: political theatre and the politics of theatre

Noël Coward’s 1947 injunction to Mrs Worthington not to put her daughter on the stage was thoroughly disregarded by women in the 1970s who used performance in seven core ways, all strongly associated with feminist demands, namely to:

1. make women visible
2. take space (public and private) and make it their own
3. reclaim forgotten or buried histories of women’s cultural production
4. foreground women’s concerns
5. highlight how the personal was political
6. utilize cultural forms for political demands/ends
7. enable women to be assertively creative in contexts from which they were, or had traditionally been, debarred.

Much women’s theatre and performance of the 1970s and indeed the early 1980s was strongly political. It was made by women invested in left-wing feminist politics and centred, at the level of content, on foregrounding women’s issues. It refused androcentric cultural forms, modes of organizing and expression, and was frequently experimental in style, disrupting linear narratives, refusing the conventional structures of so-called well-made plays, playing with language. An in-yer-face attitude became the trade mark of much of this work, as well as taking that work to public spaces such as the street. Feminist political imperatives are evident in the names of the companies that were formed during this period such as the Sadista Sisters, Beryl and the Perils, Cunning Stunts, Sphinx, Siren...