

Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein

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With Wendy Wasserstein's untimely, early death from cancer in 2006 at the age of 55, critics mourned the passing of a woman hailed as one of the most successful female playwrights on Broadway. But when her most successful play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, was produced in 1989, I was among a number of U.S. feminist critics who decried Wasserstein's canonization, and hastened to point out the play's numerous political faults. Heidi was portrayed as a cipher, I argued, a passive observer who called herself a humanist rather than a feminist, even while she suffered the discriminations of her gender. Wasserstein wasn't feminist, I charged; she was homophobic; she was an upper-middle-class Manhattanite whom the press anointed to speak for women because of her cynicism about contemporary feminism. *The Heidi Chronicles*, I insisted, actually belittles and dismisses the very movement it pretends to archive.¹ Its form—realist comedy—and its context—Broadway and subsequently American regional theatres—meant a priori that the play was ideologically corrupt and had nothing useful to say to or about feminism.

But the news of Wasserstein's death prompted me to rethink my harsh critique of her work, as well as my disparagement of the mainstream-oriented, liberal feminist playwriting she represented. Here was a woman who had been embraced by the American theatre establishment. She was one of the few women playwrights to open a play directly on Broadway—*An American Daughter* in 1997—for which she received

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¹ See especially my book, *Presence and Desire: Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), where I launched this argument at length.

² See my post on *The Feminist Spectator* blog, available at http://feministspectator.blogspot.com/2006_01_01_archive.html, "Wendy Wasserstein, In Memoriam," 30 January 2006, www.feministspectator.blogspot.com (accessed March 31, 2008). See also Chris Jones's obituary, "Wendy Wasserstein, 1950–2006," *Chicago Tribune*, available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0601310160jan31,1,6185610.story>, 31 January 2006.

the largest advance ever, at that point, extended to a straight play. Yet I and other feminist critics had only disparaged her writing and her prominence, assigning her to the ranks of the co-opted and the assimilated, to the liberalism of those who sell out to established systems like the meritocracy of mainstream American theatre without trying to challenge or change them. When she died, I found myself acknowledging that Wasserstein's aim had never been revolution, but instead, to show women in some of their complex humanity, to create "universal meanings" on the basis of "women's experience."² Was this really such a bad thing?

While I wouldn't at this point repudiate my arguments with *The Heidi Chronicles*, I'm interested in why Wasserstein's plays have been so popular. Prompted by theatre scholars Susan Bennett and David Román, and their work on popular theatre, I am thinking about liberal feminist playwrights as popular playwrights who, by virtue of their appeal to wide audiences, are not taken seriously by some academics and scholars. I am now considering how their work in mainstream forums has perhaps helped, rather than hindered, certain feminist progress.

Critically reviewing Wasserstein's work has also led me to revise my thinking about the usefulness of parsing "the feminisms." My larger contention here is that the assumptions of feminist performance criticism might profitably be revised as we approach the end of the century's first decade. As capitalism becomes more and more naturalized, some third wave or post-feminists find power in how resistantly they play within, rather than stand gloomily outside of, the ever-more-permeating permutations of consumer culture. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, in their persuasive introduction to *Feminism in Popular Culture*, say, "[T]here remain powerful attachments in some feminisms to the idea that feminism can exist in an 'outside,' and vanguard, position," which they suggest is the basis of "disagreements over the relationship between second-wave and post- and third-wave feminisms."³ Second-wave feminists—so called because those of the Seneca Falls convention in 1848 were considered the first in the United States—promoted a broad agenda around gender equity and women's rights beginning in the late 1960s, when they splintered off from the civil rights movement and anti-war activism of the New Left. The concerns and practices of this second wave eventually became taxonomized by feminist academics as liberal, cultural, or materialist.

Third-wave (or "post-") feminism, by contrast, refers to a chronologically younger generation of American and British women for whom, as British cultural critic Angela McRobbie suggests, feminism is accounted for and "spent"—a force that has done its work and can now be both assumed as normative and implicitly dismissed.⁴ Conducting feminist practice, as third wavers advocate, from a place admittedly within capitalism (and within dominant ideology) could be advantageous, instead of holding on to what

³ Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, "Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism," in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (New York: Berg, 2006), 2. They elaborate by suggesting that some critics want to hold on to the notion of the feminist critique as "outside," while others argue that it's impossible to get outside "the construction of subjectivity [within] the production/consumption cycle of global commodification" (14).

⁴ Angela McRobbie says that "[p]ost-feminism refers to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and '80s come to be undermined. . . . [P]ost-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force"; see McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255.

might finally be an idealist belief that feminist practice can remain outside capitalism's reach. Many American feminist performance theorists and critics have historically looked to the outside or the margins for effective, socially critical theatre. Perhaps it is now time to acknowledge the potential of looking inside as well, and to address feminism as a critique or value circulating within our most commercial theatres.

In my work on utopia, I expressed interest in a revised "radical humanism" that might allow us to reclaim common, progressive, critical and political ground across identity affiliations without returning to the conservativisms of Enlightenment humanism.⁵ Here, I am attempting not to renege on the critical promise of "the feminisms," but to recuperate instead the potential of the liberal and even the cultural feminist position and the performance work generated under their rubrics. As time has passed, the distinctions among the feminisms, as they work out in specific theatre and performance practices, do not seem to me as salient as I once thought. I also find lately that many would-be "downtown," materialist, feminist performance artists hold a lot in common with many so-called uptown, liberal feminist playwrights. Although they might employ different techniques and styles (and budgets) to address different topics in very different production contexts, their aspirations are similar and simple: to reach as wide an audience as possible with innovative, socially progressive theatre work.

I now find tedious the somewhat facile pose of scholars always looking for the next new outlaw or the most outré performance examples to boast as aesthetically radical and politically subversive. While the work they uncover is often effective and important, in the rush to innovation, already-noted artists are too often dismissed. Likewise, in the movement of sexuality studies and gender theory away from a focus on women and toward gender-queer subjects and trans-studies, women and feminist subjects are sometimes seen as archaic and irrelevant.⁶ When I began writing feminist performance criticism and theory in the 1980s, feminism was a vibrant, growing field of critical and artistic practice. Those of us working in the field expected feminist work to grow and flourish, to expand and proliferate, in ways that required a useful taxonomy like "the feminisms" to productively sort out all this work.

I never would have predicted that within fifteen or so short years, feminism would be declared "done," not just by the mainstream media eager to chart newer ideological fads, but by academics and even activists who began to see the method and the movement as constrained and static. In 2008, not enough feminist performance work is visible or taken seriously for scholars to make the fine distinctions that once seemed necessary. My current change of heart about liberal feminism and popular playwrights comes from a sober acknowledgment that this historical moment is very different than the one in which I wrote twenty years ago. And after eight years of the Bush administration and the taste it has left of the most chilling sorts of ideological conservatism, I believe that progressive feminists can no longer afford to disparage one another's work or split critical hairs about which forms, contexts, and contents do more radically activist work.

⁵ See my *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁶ For astute feminist critiques of the move to position feminism as old-fashioned, see, for only two examples, Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), and Susanna Danuta Walters, "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)," *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 830–69.

A typology of feminisms remains helpful, and I continue to find that discerning differences among liberal, cultural, and materialist feminist ideologies and practices offers important tools for rigorous critical examination. And as a critic/theorist, I remain interested in the Marxist/Brechtian analysis that breaks open conventional forms and gives feminists fertile resources for our investigations into representation.⁷ But in the spirit of critical generosity, I want to be careful not to imply that materialist feminism provides a superior method of creating or engaging performance. Liberal and cultural feminist productions and analyses play important roles in the ultimate goal of making women—in all their sexual, racial, ethnic, class, ability, and other complexities—more visible and powerful not only in theatre, but in all realms of social life. Our ambition should be to strengthen our power as feminist creators and commentators. As a result, I am now more inclined to cast a wide net across all sorts of performance in my activities as a committed feminist critic and as a spectator.

Returning, then, to Wendy Wasserstein to revise my earlier rejection of liberal feminism brings me full circle, and in fact, Wasserstein's work provides a useful touchstone for this investigation. *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989), *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992), and Wasserstein's final play, *Third* (2005), are regularly mounted at regional theatres across the country, and since her death, her early play, *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), has been frequently revived. I want to consider what Wasserstein offered the American imagination that let her plays be produced on Broadway and then in regional theatres when so many other women playwrights can't achieve a toe-hold on the mountain of public esteem. Obviously, her race and her class privilege positioned her to enter mainstream opinion with approbation. But what do her plays do structurally, thematically, and generically that allow them easy (and profitable) assimilation into the mainstream of popular theatre, if not popular culture?⁸ Wasserstein's work is also useful here because chronologically, she is a second-wave feminist, but her aspirations have been fulfilled within sanctioned popular culture and she mostly espouses, within her plays, a third-wave feminist cultural critique. As I try to historicize my own feminist critical project, I'll argue that Wasserstein's contribution to public debate about women's lives shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, and that her achievements as a contemporary American woman playwright deserve serious consideration from feminist theatre and performance critics. By taking her seriously, we give ourselves license to look at popular theatre as a vital location of pleasure, perspicacity, and political possibility.

This essay, then, revisits Wasserstein's work and US feminist performance criticism by taking the longer view. Parsing the feminisms into liberal, cultural, and materialist strands helped some feminist performance theorists and critics during the 1980s and 1990s specify a critique of forms and contents deeply embedded in ideology and material history. But this taxonomy also became exclusive and prescriptive, consigning popular liberal playwrights like Wasserstein to an always already-co-opted and easily dismissed status. Wasserstein's work, however, changed with the fortunes of feminism,

⁷For the best example of feminist criticism inspired by Brecht, see Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸David Savran makes an important distinction between theatre audiences and mass-culture audiences, explaining that "most regular theatregoers have far more disposable income than the average moviegoer. Theatre's costliness means that it remains a more specialized art form and its audiences . . . are often well-educated and highly professionalized spectators"; see *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), xv.

and her plays offer one of the few popular—if partial—histories of its progress.⁹ By focusing on Wasserstein and my own shift in opinion about her work as a case study, I would like to suggest that feminist theatre criticism might relax its dogma about form and production context, as well as political ideologies, to allow liberal feminist, popular dramaturgy to be considered more positively. This reconsideration might put feminist scholars and academic critics into closer dialogue with those writing for mainstream presses, and increase our mutual influence on the discourse about theatre and performance staged in the public sphere.

Feminist Theatre and Performance Criticism and Theory

When it first began to make claims through the lenses of gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic identities in the mid- to late-1980s, American feminist performance criticism quickly morphed from a liberal investigation of images of women in theatre and the roles women played in its production, to a more theoretical interrogation of theatre's representational apparatus and its ideological workings. Influenced by the theories of Althusser and Foucault, by French feminists Irigaray and Cixous, and by US feminist philosopher Judith Butler, feminist performance theory raised questions about how performance-specific forms and structures both shape and reflect women's lives.

Where the earliest feminist incursions into theatre addressed women's status onstage in the stories their productions told, and offstage by examining the biases against women in the theatre industry, the theoretical work of the 1980s shifted focus to analyses of the styles, genres, and forms that delivered often-oppressive understandings of women.¹⁰ Early in the history of this critique, feminist theorists such as Gayle Austin, Sue-Ellen Case, Kate Davy, Elin Diamond, Lynda Hart, Vicki Patraha, Peggy Phelan, Janelle Reinelt, and many others brought theatrical realism—the mainstay of popular theatre—under the microscope, examining its operations and diagnosing that the form itself was “lethal” for women.¹¹ Part of the antirealism phase of American feminist performance criticism in the 1980s and 1990s came from a strict adherence to poststructuralist theory's suspicion of power in all its forms, and Marxist criticism's insistence on linking form and content to derive meaning from texts. Feminist performance theory argued that ideology is inevitably written into form, and that realism—with its resolutely domestic locales, its box sets, its middle-class, bourgeois proprieties, and its conservative moralizing against outsiders who threaten the normative social order—was bound to marginalize and demonize women and others who don't fit conventional models of white, male, middle-class, heterosexual decorum. To escape the constraints of the realist form, feminist performance theory instructed, new contents could only be developed in new narrative structures, more radical representational forms, and subcultural production contexts.

⁹See, for example, Charlotte Canning, “Feminists Perform their Past: Constructing History in *The Heidi Chronicles* and *The Break of Day*,” in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Vale and Vivien Gardner (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 163–79.

¹⁰For early feminist writing on theatre, see, for only one example, the foundational anthology, *Women in American Theatre*, 3rd. ed., ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006). That the book, first published in 1981, is now in its third edition attests to the continuing need for feminist performance criticism to advance on multiple fronts simultaneously.

¹¹Sue-Ellen Case, “Re-viewing Hrotsvit,” *Theatre Journal* 35, no. 4 (1983): 533–42, and “Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts,” *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 3 (1985): 317–27. The literature on feminist performance theory's critique of realism is rich and extensive; see, for only several examples, my *Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (1988; repr., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*.

Because conventional realism dominated Broadway and regional theatre at the time, popular theatre was dismissed with a quick slash of the feminist theoretical pen.

At the same time, “feminism” as a hegemonic designation for a critical methodology came under scrutiny. To build a more precise taxonomy, theorists aligned artists’ express commitment to agitate for women’s equal treatment on- and backstage with a “liberal” feminist ideological persuasion. Critical studies of the deeper ideological scaffolding of forms, contents, and modes of production aligned with a “materialist” strand of feminism linked to Marxism and to theories of social constructionism derived from Butler and Foucault. This materialist focus also debunked what had been popularized in the 1970s and early ’80s in the United States as “women’s culture” for its gender essentialisms, calling it, in Alice Echols’s famous designation, “cultural feminism.”¹² These concepts, which popularized “liberal,” “cultural,” and “materialist” as strands of feminism, were meant initially as descriptive and explanatory and to lend precision to the political implications of performance. They also helped to demystify the notion of one, unitary feminism with a coercive interpretive perspective. The feminisms helpfully extended the performance critique to form and context as well as content and images, providing language that probed deeply into the apparatus of representation and its modes of production.

But the feminisms quickly accrued value and judgments, weighing materialist practices as superior to those considered liberal or cultural feminist. My own work, especially in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), participated in this critical disavowal of so-called liberal feminist theatre practices and helped to institute the feminisms as a gauge of purported efficacy rather than as a critical method for simply distinguishing differences in political perspectives as well as performance form, content, and context. At least partly as a result of this theoretical and political hierarchy, many feminist performance scholars invested in what was deemed the illicit, more radical practices of materialist work by avant-garde groups working on the margins of mainstream theatre and ignored women playwrights still struggling to be accepted in more visible, conventional mainstream contexts. At this point in my own evolution as a feminist performance scholar and critic, I regret the exclusivity of these claims and how surprisingly dogmatic they sometimes became. In short order, it became déclassé to be a liberal feminist critic and scholar, or to look at mainstream, commercial theatre for what it might say about women’s lives and their work and the contributions it might make to a widespread conversation about women in American culture. This unfortunate dismissal meant that some of us (myself included) turned our backs on colleagues and trade-press critics who did write about mainstream theatre and women playwrights’ work under liberal feminism’s auspices.¹³

This is not to say that many feminist theatre scholars didn’t continue to write about American women playwrights on Broadway or elsewhere in the country outside of

¹² Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

¹³ I’d like to thank the anonymous *Theatre Journal* reader of this essay for underlining the fact that many scholars and critics continued to work in the liberal feminist vein. I’ve long regretted some of my actions in this regard, including, for instance, branding Gabrielle Cody a liberal feminist in a less-than-complimentary fashion after she critiqued Sue-Ellen Case’s book, *Feminism and Theatre*, in the pages of *The Women’s Review of Books*. See Jill Dolan, “In Defense of the Discourse,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 33, no. 3 (1989): 58–71. For her rebuttal, see Gabrielle Cody, “More Defense, More Discourse,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 34, no. 2 (1990): 8–9.

the few blocks of real estate in downtown Manhattan where many feminist theorists found rich demonstrations of materialist performance.¹⁴ But I do think that partly as a result of the taxonomy of feminisms, the subaltern prevailed in our scholarship and our criticism. Many of us left women working in mainstream contexts and popular locations off the radar of some of our most rigorous, scrupulous feminist theoretical study. Feminist attention was paid to collectives and solo performers rather than to individual women playwrights plying their wares through the often-torturous development system of mainstream American theatre. Yet ironically, as time passed, much of the collective work we cherished faced vexing issues of authorship and ownership, as the feminist ideals on which the work was based were haunted (even hounded) by the prerogatives of a capitalist marketplace insistent that “the author” be an individual.¹⁵

While US feminist performance theory found apt illustrations of its ideas in solo performance-artists’ work, collective performances—or in Brechtian-inflected postmodernist texts—feminists transnationally continued to engage with plays and representations of women in more conventional theatre, linking these concerns to political issues in their nations. For example, Jung-Soon Shim, a prominent international feminist scholar, writing on Korean women’s drama, says that while theoretical work on women preoccupies feminists in the West, “contemporary Korean feminism . . . [is] primarily concerned with immediate women’s social issues such as the institutionalization of the sexual violence prevention law (1997), the Korean comfort women reparations issue, and women’s contribution to the reunification process of North and South Korea.”¹⁶

Likewise, Angelika Czekay notes that many East German women “prior to 1989, showed a strong resistance to Western feminism, regarding gender issues as secondary or even irrelevant within the commitment to and pursuit of a socialist agenda.”¹⁷ Fawzia Afzal-Khan says that in Pakistani Muslim theatre, audiences resist experimental forms, from the modernist and postmodernist avant-garde to Brechtian alienation, because “audience expectation tends towards the cathartic experience found in theatre and film. The deconstructive impulse behind [some] performance work in the West does not interest theatre directors in Pakistan since the political, social and economic realities in the latter are so different.”¹⁸ As a result, Afzal-Khan argues that theatre-makers working for local audiences “embrace naturalist realism.”¹⁹

Taken together, these comments from women across a variety of national contexts suggest that American feminist performance theory’s preoccupations with women’s ontology in representation, competing feminist epistemologies, and materialist feminist critiques of form as well as content do not neatly universalize across geographical and

¹⁴ In fact, many feminist scholars looked to the contributions of international women playwrights during this period, whose work seemed immune to the strict categorizations brought to feminist work in the United States.

¹⁵ See, for example, the contention among Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver over various roles in their collaboration, *Dress Suits to Hire*, and Deb Margolin’s debate with Shaw and Weaver over the authorship and ownership of some of their last collaborations as a trio.

¹⁶ Jung-Soon Shim, “The Confucian Difference: Yin/Yang Feminism in Korean Women’s Dramas,” *Theatre Research International* 24, no. 3 (1999): 241.

¹⁷ Angelika Czekay, “Moving Beyond Imaginary Walls: FIT’s Handbook *Women in European Theatre Today*,” *Theatre Research International* 24, no. 3 (1999): 259.

¹⁸ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, “Pakistani Muslim Theatre at Home and Abroad: A Critical Manifesto for a Feminist Homecoming,” in *Staging International Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case and Elaine Aston (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

cultural interests.²⁰ UK feminist theorists Elaine Aston, Gerry Harris, and Lena Simic believe that the strict, poststructuralist ideological and formal positions on feminist performance during the last twenty years created a “privileging of particular aesthetic strategies. . . . As a result, certain types of women’s theatre and performance-making have become problematic to discuss in ‘feminist’ terms.” They implicitly critique US feminist theorists for focusing on avant-garde work that “fit[s] particular theoretical and aesthetic models,” and demonstrate the differences in feminist approaches across—as well as within—national borders.²¹

In fact, by focusing exclusively on the politically and theatrically marginalized, many US feminist performance theorists participated in what queer theatre scholar David Román calls “the ‘romance with the indigenus,’ . . . the endorsement of community-based and often obscure cultural productions, venues, and genres that seem more rooted in the ‘authentic,’ and artists and icons who are linked to progressive social movements.”²² This tendency in feminist performance analysis has brought much-needed attention to feminist artists with trenchant political critiques and innovative, often exhilarating performance practices. But it has led some critics further and further away from more-conventional venues like Off Broadway, Broadway, or regional theatres to discuss women and performance.

Feminism and the Popular

Theatre scholars such as Román and Susan Bennett have recently argued that our scholarship has neglected the fertile field of commercial theatre. Bennett says, “Though its audiences have been large and enthusiastic, critical practice has, apparently, found [commercial theatre] of little or no interest to our sophisticated and theoretically informed theatre historiography and dramatic criticism.”²³ Román, too, exhorts performance scholars to reassess our aversion to the mainstream:

Commercial theatre offers its own pleasures and possibilities, and appreciating them should not automatically brand one as naïve or politically unaware. The disdain of commercial theatre constitutes a strain of anti-theatricality that is symptomatic of larger cultural anxieties about class, capital, pleasure, and the popular.²⁴

²⁰ The Feminist Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research, under the leadership of Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case, has been exemplary in addressing transnational feminist theatre issues. Likewise, while for some US feminist performance critics, lesbian subjectivity has been a primary source of theoretical innovation, Naomi Tonooka points out that “within a Japanese context,” “out” lesbian performance-artist Tari Ito’s public and political representations of same-sex desire “are considerable achievements as women rarely are supposed to have an ‘active’ desire and women’s sexuality is not a topic often seen in the theatre. Furthermore, in the eyes of most citizens, the presence of lesbians is simply invisible, let alone lesbian aesthetic practices”; see Tonooka, “Desire and Sexual (In)difference: Constructing Lesbian Self in Tari Ito’s Performance with the Skin,” *Theatre Research International* 24, no. 3 (1999): 254.

²¹ Elaine Aston, Gerry Harris, and Lena Simic, “‘It is Good to Look at One’s Own Shadow’: A Women’s International Theatre Festival and Questions for International Feminism,” in *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. Elaine Aston and Gerry Harris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 172.

²² David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 30.

²³ Susan Bennett, “Theatre/Tourism,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 3 (2005): 407.

²⁴ Román, *Performance in America*, 34.

Feminist musical-theatre scholar Stacy Wolf, whose book *A Problem Like Maria* charts the Broadway careers of four women stars as progressive sites of lesbian identification and desire, has also argued against the derided position of popular musicals in the public and scholarly imagination. Wolf says that "Broadway musicals never truly qualified as high art and, to many, never earned the label 'art' at all. A far cry from the Broadway plays of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams, musicals were seen as distinctively middlebrow, middle-of-the-road entertainment."²⁵ Feminist theatre criticism hasn't been exempt from the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy that has hampered a more-equitable assessment of theatre production (and the arts) in general.

In addition, the materialist feminist critical binary in which "subcultural" equates with "radical" and therefore "good," and "commercial" or "popular" means "hegemonic" and therefore "bad," has never been completely supported by performers' own aspirations. One of the first feminist discussions about performance in the mainstream was documented in the rancorous exchange between Sue-Ellen Case and Holly Hughes in the pages of *TDR: The Drama Review* in 1989.²⁶ This debate concerned taking *Dress Suits to Hire*, the collaboration among Hughes, Lois Weaver, and Peggy Shaw, out of the Lower East Side of New York City to the University of Michigan, where it played for predominantly heterosexual, gender-mixed audiences. This question of feminist (and especially lesbian) theatre's place in the mainstream has always complicated our theory and our practice. While feminist academics brought performers creating aesthetically new and politically daring work in subcultural showcases to the attention of university and college communities, many of those same performers wanted to present their work in even more mainstream, visible public venues to attract wider, more diverse audiences and to help them earn a living wage. Once-marginalized performers like Lisa Kron (who began her work with the Five Lesbian Brothers at the WOW Café) now ply their trade through the regional theatre system, as well as on Broadway stages. After its initial run at the Public Theatre in lower Manhattan, already an important move into more mainstream notice, Kron toured her autobiographical *2.5 Minute Ride* (1999) at a number of regionals; recently, another actress performed the role in a New York City production.²⁷ Kron's play *Well* (which she calls a "solo performance with some other people in it"),²⁸ which was also originally produced at the Public Theatre, moved to Broadway's Longacre Theatre in 2005 for a critically acclaimed, although relatively short and financially unsuccessful, run.²⁹

This move into what some feminist critics might consider hegemonic venues did not dilute Kron's formal innovations or her social critique in either production. While

²⁵ Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 12. See also David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), for his discussion of "the brows" and how they influence the politics of taste in scholarship as well as reception practices.

²⁶ "A Case Concerning Hughes," *TDR: The Drama Review* 33, no. 4 (1989): 10–17.

²⁷ Lisa Kron, *2.5 Minute Ride and 101 Humiliating Stories* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001). The production starred Nicole Golden and was presented at Altered Stages in New York City in January and February 2008.

²⁸ *Well* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006).

²⁹ *Well* played for twenty-three previews and fifty-three performances, but hovered, toward the end of its run, at about one-third capacity; see Kenneth Jones, "M Is for the Misery of Closing: *Well*, Lisa Kron's Mom-Centered Comedy, Ends Broadway Run," *Playbill.com* 14 May 2006, available at <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/99676.html> (accessed 24 June 2007).

some of the edgy sexual representations of her work with the Brothers might be absent in her independent work, *2.5 Minute Ride* juxtaposes a trip to Auschwitz with her father with a family outing to an amusement park Lisa took with her partner, Peg Healy, using visually evocative metaphors in the solo performance idiom. *Well* interrogates racism in Lansing, Michigan, in the 1960s, as well as perceptions of women's health and wellness, which become analogies for their personal and political agency. The self-consciously metatheatrical form lets Kron reflect on how she tells her story, as well as its content.

Kron's example of a renegade downtown performer moving gradually into the very center of the mainstream is only one indication that divisions between "downtown" performance and "uptown" theatre are no longer as jealously guarded. Many more once-subcultural performers like Kron actively seek out larger audiences and would be delighted to present their work at venues like the Public Theatre, with its often direct-development line to commercial Broadway productions. Even the Five Lesbian Brothers moved from the WOW Café fairly early in their collective career to mount productions at the Off Broadway New York Theatre Workshop—a half-block farther east on Fourth Street from WOW.³⁰ To suggest that these artists have "sold out" doesn't do justice to the complexities of audience reception, the movement of ideas and genres through systems of theatre production, or the historically shifting status of identities like "lesbian," "gay," and "feminist" that poststructuralist theory taught us are fluid.

The fact remains that visibility in commercial, mainstream, popular forums like Broadway matters for women playwrights and performers, so it is important for feminist critics and scholars to dissect what their presence there means and what it accomplishes. As critic Laurin Porter comments, "While popular success is obviously not a reliable index of artistic merit or a worthy objective in and of itself, it is one measure of a work's potential for making an impact. At the very least, it speaks to the possibility of reaching an audience."³¹ In the 1980s, many feminist critics privileged postmodernist, outlawed performances over plays that circulated in more visible public venues and reached wider audiences. Sue-Ellen Case and Erica Stevens Abbitt, in their *SIGNS* review of contemporary feminist theatre scholarship, remark on this binary. They suggest that "[t]he individual [critical] texts seem sharply divided in focus: either they attend to plays (in the traditional sense of the word), or they describe postmodern performances. It seems a combination of these forms and practices is not common to the field."³² Perhaps we can amplify our effectiveness as feminist commentators by ad-

³⁰ For more information about the Five Lesbian Brothers, see my post, "The Return of the Five Lesbian Brothers," *The Feminist Spectator*, August 1, 2005, available at http://feministspectator.blogspot.com/2005_08_01_archive.html. New York Theatre Workshop is the company that developed, for example, Jonathan Larson's pop musical *Rent* and moved it to Broadway. The proliferation of subaltern productions intimately linked, as Román suggests, to specific communities and, more importantly, through autobiography, to specific performers and their own bodies and experiences, means that while autobiographical solo performances tour and are often taught, they aren't frequently reproduced by other performers or staged as part of regional, college, community, or high school theatre repertoires in which plays are popularized and secure their long-term followings.

³¹ Laurin Porter, "Contemporary Playwrights/Traditional Forms," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, ed. Brenda Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 211.

³² Sue-Ellen Case and Erica Stevens Abbitt, "Disidentification, Diaspora, and Desire: Questions on the Future of the Feminist Critique of Performance," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 3 (2004): 927.

dressing the popular mainstream as well as avant-garde, experimental, and subcultural styles, contents, and venues.

If nothing else, mainstream commercial and regional nonprofit theatre deserves criticism for its persistent gender inequities, as well as for continuing to marginalize playwrights of color. All these many years into the project of US feminist performance criticism and theory, American women—whether white, straight, lesbian, and/or of color—have still not made the gains in visibility and access that feminist arts advocacy might have predicted. Susan Jonas, for instance, one of the architects (along with Susanne Bennett) of the “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” prepared for the New York State Council on the Arts in 2002, noted that the situation for women playwrights and directors has remained virtually the same over the last almost thirty years.³³

The Case of Wendy Wasserstein

I turn my own critical lens here to Wendy Wasserstein partly because I treated her work so harshly in the past, and partly because twenty or so years later, with my own aging well underway, I find myself unexpectedly identifying with her latest (and last) heroine, Professor Laurie Jameson, in her play *Third*. (I’ll work my way toward explaining that identification here.) Wasserstein had all the right credentials for being the first woman in the late twentieth century to achieve commercial, Broadway success.³⁴ She was born to an immigrant Jewish family made good. Her grandfather emigrated from Poland and worked in Yiddish theatre, which gave her mother, an eccentric dancer, an opportunity to, among other things, have dinner with the famous performer Molly Picon. Wasserstein’s father was a successful textile manufacturer who moved his family fairly early in her life from Brooklyn to Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Wasserstein’s brother, Bruce, chairs a powerful investment-banking firm as well as owning *New York Magazine*, and her two sisters are also securely upper-middle-class. Wasserstein’s acceptance to the Yale School of Drama secured her eventual place in the pantheon of successful theatre artists. She was the only woman playwright at the drama school at a time when feminism was just beginning to percolate around the edges of the Ivy League. Wasserstein says that she wrote *Uncommon Women and Others*, her first significant play, so that she could see people like herself onstage—a theme that echoed throughout her career in ways that can clearly be considered gender advocacy.

³³See “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” prepared for the New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Program by Susan Jonas and Susanne Bennett, January 2002, available at <http://www.womenarts.org/advocacy/WomenCountNYSCARreport.htm>.

³⁴Brenda Murphy, in her preface to *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, recalls that “Susan Glaspell, Sophie Treadwell, Rachel Crothers, and Lillian Hellman . . . achieved both commercial and critical success in the theatre of the twenties and thirties. As Judith Stephens and Christine Gray remind us, however, access to the commercial theatre was still severely restricted for women of color at mid-century, and accomplished playwrights like Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Angelina Weld Grimké saw most of their work go unproduced, or produced only in alternative venues like high school auditoriums and church basements” (xiv). Ironically, however, when at the end of her note she admits that her “chief regret” as editor “is that, because space is so finite, so many playwrights had to be left out of the volume or given less attention than they deserve” (xv), the bulk of the absent playwrights she lists are women of color, lesbians, or Jews—replicating, in the *Cambridge Companion*, the historical critical erasure she had just decried.

Wasserstein's plays outlined women's issues that were just breaking into public view. *Uncommon Women and Others*, written when she was finishing her MFA at Yale, remains one of the first proto-feminist realist plays, and *Isn't it Romantic* (1983), a too-often-ignored early work, addresses heterosexual romance and marriage with dry-eyed pragmatism. Wasserstein engaged the terms of feminist debate that continues to rile many white, heterosexual, middle-class women. Given what was then a range of new professional choices, how would women like her characters manage to juggle romance, family, a career, and politics and gain the esteem of their peers? How would they "have it all," the theme of the *zeitgeist* that critics see as fundamental to Wasserstein's work?³⁵

With *The Heidi Chronicles*, her 1988 Broadway debut play, which won the Pulitzer Prize and that year's Tony Award for Best Play, however, Wasserstein stepped into a fault line of opposing sides in a cultural debate about feminism. *Heidi* is the fulcrum work in her oeuvre, in which her character serves as the mouthpiece for her own ambivalence about how feminist activism has and hasn't served women. Although Wasserstein is chronologically a second-wave liberal feminist whose writing always addresses gender, *The Heidi Chronicles*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *An American Daughter*, and *Third* are third-wave or post-feminist plays in which women characters reject second-wave strictures and evince comfort with their status inside dominant culture. This contradiction draws compelling tensions in and around Wasserstein's work.

The Heidi Chronicles perhaps most fiercely stages Wasserstein's accusation that second-wave feminism didn't fulfill the promises with which it enticed women to challenge their personal and political status quos.³⁶ In her post-*Heidi* plays, Wasserstein tracked this feminist conundrum across several different milieus. She mixed the complexities of Jewish identity with gender exploration in *The Sisters Rosensweig* (1992)—a critically acclaimed, frequently produced family saga notable as one of the few plays in which Wasserstein makes the aspirations of and relationships among Jewish American women central to her play's unfolding. In *An American Daughter* (1997), her incisive, fictionalized account of a Zoe Baird/Kimba Wood/Lani Guinier-style woman's sabotaged nomination for high public office, Wasserstein staged a play of ideas in which gender inequities and the wildly different expectations of feminist generations drive a plot that offers an astute critique of Clinton-era gender betrayals. Her final play, *Third* (2005), presents a morality tale that questions the dogmatism of identity politics in the United States by challenging the values of a second-wave feminist caught in her own suddenly parochial beliefs.

Wasserstein asserted continually that the fact that her plays were produced at all was a political, feminist gesture. She says, "My work is often thought of as lightweight commercial comedy, and I have always thought, No, you don't understand: this is a political act. *The Sisters Rosensweig* had the biggest advance in Broadway history,

³⁵ See, for example, Angelika Czekay, "'Not Having It All': Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women*," in *The Playwright's Muse*, ed. Joan Herrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18; and Gail Ciociola, *Wendy Wasserstein: Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998).

³⁶ Christopher Bigsby calls the play's infamous "I thought we were all in this together" speech a "brilliantly free-form aria, which offers an account of lives that have become lifestyles, as if all that had been needed was to redecorate the room of one's own"; see Bigsby, "Wendy Wasserstein," in *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 352.

therefore nobody's going to turn down a play on Broadway because a woman wrote it or because it's about women."³⁷ Wasserstein pioneered gender equity in a mainstream forum that continues to be closed to real, lasting progress for women artists. She single-mindedly kept women at the center of her work and insisted that people reckon with the particularities of their lives. When she observed the rampant sexism at Yale, critic Christopher Bigsby says that

she decided to write a play in which all the characters were women, a play whose politics lay essentially in that gesture. As she has said, "It's political because it's a matter of saying, 'you must hear this.' You can hear it in an entertaining fashion, and you can hear it from real people, but you must know and examine the problems these women face."³⁸

The women about whom she wrote were predominantly white, economically comfortable, well-educated, and heterosexual, and many women just like her characters comprised the audiences for her plays. Wasserstein was always perceptive about and generous with her audiences. She told interviewer David Savran:

Even when I was young, when I did *Uncommon Women*, I thought, I want to put the people who come to my plays up on the stage. Same thing for *The Sisters Rosensweig*. I thought, If the Gorgeouses of life are the matinee ladies, let them see themselves on stage. Why do they have to sit there and see themselves as the wife who's a jerk and getting divorced?³⁹

She writes, too, for professional women "roughly my age," "because those people often keep culture alive."⁴⁰ *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones, in his obituary for Wasserstein, wrote:

[She] was the rare feminist playwright who embraced the glamour and the confines of Broadway. Unlike most of her peers, Wasserstein was perfectly happy writing accessible, well-made and thoroughly commercial plays from the point of view of intelligent, well-to-do women, whose privileged educations and progressive ideas brought them more than their share of personal frustrations.⁴¹

This was, in fact, the hallmark of her liberalism—that the women in her plays wanted to assume what they saw as their rightful place among the rich, the famous, and the powerful, and came to understand how gender impeded achievements to which they felt entitled.

Perhaps as a result of her characters' aspirations, Wasserstein was the only woman who saw her plays regularly transferred to Broadway houses for significant runs.⁴²

³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 367. Bigsby takes a similar view of *Uncommon Women and Others*, suggesting that the "real feminism [of the play] lies not in the lives of the characters but the fact of the play" (338).

³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 334.

³⁹ Savran, *The Playwright's Voice*, 301. "Gorgeous" is Wasserstein's sister's name, as well as that of the comfortably wealthy, suburban matron character in *The Sisters Rosensweig*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 299. Savran notes in another context: "The small audience that attends professional theatre today, whether commercial or more experimental venues, is overwhelmingly middle or upper-middle class and decidedly liberal in its social attitudes. It also must be relatively affluent, insofar as live theatre is far more expensive than movies or cable TV" (see Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 62).

⁴¹ Chris Jones, "Wendy Wasserstein, 1950–2006," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 January 2006, available at www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationalworld/chi-0601310160jan31,1,6185610.story (accessed 1 February 2006).

⁴² Wasserstein isn't the only recent American woman playwright to be presented on Broadway; Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* ran at the Ambassador Theatre and won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize. In November 2007, Theresa Rebeck's *Maritius* opened at the Biltmore Theatre. But Wasserstein remains the only woman with a career in which most of her work was presented on Broadway during her lifetime.

Although set apart by the intrinsic (and often ethnic) comedy of her work, mainstream critics took her plays seriously and noted her exceptionalism in a U.S. forum that still privileges work by white men and the late August Wilson as its norm. Critic/columnist Frank Rich, on the occasion of Wasserstein's death, wrote, "A woman of her generation didn't have her career in the theatre, especially the commercial theatre, without fighting for it."⁴³ Chris Jones wrote that "the beloved playwright was widely regarded as the official poet of both a generation and a sex."⁴⁴ Michael Feingold concurred in *The Village Voice*, "Her project . . . was to dramatize the female life of America in her time without scanting its complexity, its pain, its inconveniences, or its lapses into the absurd."⁴⁵ In many ways, Wasserstein preached to the converted (an accusation more typically flung at feminist theatre collectives working in avant-garde spaces), but in this case, the "converted" were liberal, often Jewish women predisposed to find their values affirmed by her plays.⁴⁶

Wasserstein worked as an individual playwright writing what she wanted to see at the theatre, just as feminist theatre-makers of the same era used collective methods to stage what they also wanted to see and couldn't locate in cultural representations. As feminist historian Charlotte Canning suggests, "[the] primary motivation [of the feminist theatre groups of the 1970s] was to create performance they were not seeing."⁴⁷ Charles Isherwood likewise reported in his obituary that Wasserstein "recalled attending Broadway plays as a young woman and being struck by the absence of people like herself onstage: 'I remember going to them and thinking, I really like this, but where are the girls?'"⁴⁸

Part of Wasserstein's satirical insight rested on just such observations of who was left out of social scenes she often studied from the outside, even though she knew these locales very well. Much of the humor in her plays draws from her canny ability to engage capitalist American culture with both an insider and an outsider's eye. Wasserstein clearly knew the foibles of the rich and the restless in New York. She peppers her plays with fashion and product brand-names familiar to the cognoscenti, and uses their acquisition to signal the shallowness of characters who define themselves solely by what they buy, where they travel, and whom they know. Wasserstein knew this world intimately yet observed it at some remove, rather than identifying with it and

⁴³ Frank Rich, "Everybody's Wendy," *New York Times*, 31 December 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/31/magazine/31wasserstein.t.html> (accessed January 1, 2007).

⁴⁴ Jones, "Wendy Wasserstein."

⁴⁵ Michael Feingold, "Wendy Wasserstein, 1950–2006," *Village Voice*, 30 January 2006, available at www.villagevoice.com (accessed 2 February 2006).

⁴⁶ See David Román and Tim Miller, "Preaching to the Converted," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (1995): 169–88. Many commentators concur on the predominant ethnic makeup of Broadway audiences. Scholar Henry Bial, for instance, notes that critic Alisa Solomon, writing about the first scene of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, "went so far as to suggest that Kushner's construction of the scene, with the Rabbi alone onstage speaking outward in the second person, directly implicated 'an American theatre audience—itsself largely Jewish and liberal' in his admonition. We might also note in passing that the casualness of Solomon's assertion that the American theatre audience is 'largely Jewish' suggests that this claim reflects conventional wisdom among theatre critics" (see Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005], 113).

⁴⁷ Canning, "Feminists Perform their Past," 164.

⁴⁸ Charles Isherwood, "Wendy Wasserstein, Chronicler of Women's Identity Crises, Dies," *New York Times*, January 30, 2006, available at www.nytimes.com/2006/01/30/theater/30cnd-wasserstein.html (accessed 30 January 2006).

letting it subsume her. Wasserstein's full-figured body, her gender, and in some ways her Jewishness kept her from being fully embraced into the center of gentile, WASP-American, Northeast power. Bigsby notes that Wasserstein was "aware . . . of having, at various stages in her life, been a Jew amongst non-Jews, a fact that has perhaps given her a double perspective from which some of her humor derives."⁴⁹ Feingold says (rather condescendingly) that the playwright's trademark "giggle" "was an insecure plump girl's defense against a coldhearted world that mistakes anorexic for beautiful, and a smart, observant child's satirical comment on the absurdities of that world."⁵⁰ These tensions thread through her plays and lend them what appears to me now as their critically feminist edge.

Wasserstein brought certain gendered actions, objects, and issues to the stage that were notable, if not revolutionary, in their time and place. For instance, in 1977, just as the women's movement caught public attention, a character in her play *Uncommon Women and Others* makes "Rorschach tests with her menstrual blood to summon back Edvard Munch" and relates a frank monologue about penises.⁵¹ Another character sits onstage "filling a diaphragm with Orthocreame" (32). These characters might have been wearing Villager sweaters and Bass Weejuns—the sartorial accessories at the time of the upper-middle class—but Wasserstein caught the spirit of the *zeitgeist* in the stage business she wrote for them and in the cultural references she littered throughout the play, which place it in history and give it topical weight. Czekay says,

Wasserstein historicizes each plays' present by integrating references from contemporary cultural, political, and feminist history. To mark the historicity of women's experiences, she juxtaposes different time periods, either by inserting flashbacks . . . by mapping out a chronology . . . or by contrasting characters from different generations . . . This dramaturgy allows her to frame the personal within the larger context of the political and, thus, offers gendered experience as a historical category.⁵²

Although Wasserstein's work falls squarely in the realist genre, her ability to textualize history with such temporal juxtapositions in her plays' narratives lends them a more socially critical edge.

The most effective social gestus in Wasserstein's plays is the often-repeated stage direction instructing women characters to exit the stage arm in arm. This insistent demonstration of camaraderie and affection strikes me as moving and hopeful each time I read it, regardless of what the rest of the plot might dictate for these determining, foundational female friendships. In some ways, these embodied gestures communicate more about Wasserstein's commitment to women than some of her dialogue.⁵³ She also

⁴⁹ Bigsby, "Wendy Wasserstein," 332.

⁵⁰ Feingold, "Wendy Wasserstein."

⁵¹ Wendy Wasserstein, *Uncommon Women and Others*, in *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 20, 34. All other references will appear in the text.

⁵² Czekay, "Not Having It All," 20. Czekay also suggests that Wasserstein's references to popular music "evoke specific cultural moments" that allow the problems she investigates to be not "merely those of a single character," but to become "representative of a whole generation" (30). On the other hand, during his interview with Wasserstein, Savran says that "in a lot of popular culture . . . music becomes a substitute for history. Instead of looking at what was really happening during the sixties, we'll put on some Supremes" (*The Playwright's Voice*, 306)—a critique one could certainly make of *The Heidi Chronicles*.

⁵³ Bigsby disagrees, in his reading of this moment in *Uncommon Women*, and makes a worthy point: "The final stage direction may indicate that they exit with their arms around each other, but there

often uses the gesture to bridge the public and the private, since in many of her plays, Wasserstein clarifies that for women, despite what might be our desires otherwise, no separation holds between the two spheres.

Wasserstein also shifted the typical American dramaturgical emphasis from fathers and sons to mothers and daughters in all of her plays, viewing gender as a site of solidarity as well as oppression. She focused on mother–daughter relationships not as an essentialist paradigm of cozy mutual narcissism, but as a battleground of values and generations. In *Isn't it Romantic*, the mothers are much more progressive than their daughters. Janie Blumberg's mother carries an attaché case filled with exercise equipment and wears a cape with a tie-dyed leotard underneath. She is a dancer and encourages her daughter to follow her highly performative artistic spirit. This struggle between the artistic and the professional, between the outlaw and the insider, echoes throughout Wasserstein's work, as she continues to mull women's options.

The central women characters in most of Wasserstein's plays work: they are writers, or politicians, or doctors, or professors, or journalists, all of whom move in socially influential circles. They constantly ask: "Where do our actions matter most?" In *An American Daughter* (1997), feminist generations clash openly around this question and precipitate the main character's public disgrace. Lyssa Dent Hughes, who has been nominated to be surgeon general by a president reminiscent of Bill Clinton, is a second-wave feminist long committed to women's health. But the media use the matter of an unanswered jury summons to torpedo Lyssa's nomination, and a younger, third-wave feminist journalist who goes by the gender-neutral, patrician name Quincy Quince plays a key part in Lyssa's undoing. Wasserstein uses the play to sort out women's very different relationships to the project of feminism, as well as to demonstrate once again how smart, capable women are routinely kept from important centers of power.

Along with their detailed engagement with mothers and daughters and feminist generations, Wasserstein's plays engage the vicissitudes of relationships among women. While all of her heroines are resolutely, normatively heterosexual, *Isn't it Romantic* evinces a glimmer of knowing that it is unconscionable for women to choose men instead of each other, another tension to which Wasserstein's subsequent plays frequently return.⁵⁴ The men in *Romantic* suffocate the women, but somehow, social expectation dictates they should marry regardless. That Janie—Wasserstein's heroine here—ditches her man instead of her woman friend is something of a radical act. Wasserstein uses the occasion of *Isn't it Romantic* to ask why women always capitulate to socially dictated demands that they grow up to marry and have kids. She urgently questions how heterosexual women can redefine their relationships with one another

is no suggestion that the solidarity of which they once spoke, or even the sentimental and nostalgic affection they still feel for one another, will now have the power to transform their lives" ("Wendy Wasserstein," 338).

⁵⁴ While gay men in Wasserstein's plays are always complex characters, offering comic observations or genuine insight, the only lesbian character in the playwright's canon is the poor, derided "fuzzy" Fran, who attacks Heidi during the consciousness-raising (CR) scene in the *Chronicles*, insisting: "You either shave your legs or you don't" (*The Heidi Chronicles*, 180). Wasserstein stole this line from someone she met at an actual CR session; the unequivocal criteria for political efficacy apparently made quite an impression on her. As Czekay suggests: "[S]he significantly chooses this one phrase to both ridicule early radical feminism and tokenize it within the play's only representation of lesbian sexuality. Likewise, she marks radical feminism as outside the realm of heterosexuality and thus as inapplicable to Heidi as a political stance" ("Not having It All," 31).

so that they will be considered “grown up” without men. Many of her heroines, however, wonder how they can mark their passage through their lives without these conventional milestones.⁵⁵

A typical Wasserstein gesture is to end her plays by passing the future on to the next generation. The end of *The Heidi Chronicles*, for example, which leaves our heroine ensconced in a huge, bright loft somewhere in Manhattan and crooning Sam Cook songs to her adopted Panamanian baby, dodges the questions posed by feminism. In his discussion of the play, Robert Vorlicky comments on Heidi’s unforeseen transnational adoption, saying, “[M]y concern is that very complicated choices are often represented in commercial theatre as being too easily realized.”⁵⁶ The adoption in *The Heidi Chronicles* happens magically, with no reference to the economic or emotional costs of Heidi’s choice. As Vorlicky proposes, *The Heidi Chronicles* makes complicated life choices appear way too easy. And as Gayle Austin remarked in her review of the Broadway production, “The realism it employs makes invisible the real difficulties a woman in Heidi’s position encounters, such as the costs of the transactions in the play.”⁵⁷

Yet realism also allowed Wasserstein to reach larger audiences, nimbly employing its accessibility and transparency, its ability to provoke identification and catharsis, to reel spectators into her stories and align them sympathetically with her female heroines. Realism fulfilled Wasserstein’s intentions as a playwright. While I, as well as feminist critics like Austin and Vorlicky, might cringe at the form’s facile resolutions, its inability to offer apt solutions to social problems, and its preservation of the status quo, Wasserstein did use it successfully to bring women’s lives into public view. Reviewing the problems in Wasserstein’s dramaturgy underlines once again my ambivalence about her work and my own estimation of the limitations of the realist genre in which she wrote. But nonetheless, Wasserstein’s plays do address the complications of the contemporary moment from the perspective of women whose voices are typically silenced in public debate—even when their lives center the storm of media scrutiny and disapprobation, as she illustrates persuasively in *An American Daughter*. That Wasserstein makes such characters available to public examination, identification, and empathy on Broadway is a liberal feminist achievement in the debate about the status of women in American democracy.

If more plays were written by and about more and different kinds of women, and if they were publicly discussed, hers wouldn’t continue to bear the burden of representation.⁵⁸ As Wasserstein said, in response to the feminist critique of *Heidi*:

One woman . . . can’t write that one play, that one movie. You can’t put that kind of weight on something . . . [S]uddenly you become a spokesperson, and finally you want to say, “Honey, thank God there’s a play about a gay fantasia on Broadway. And maybe next season, there’ll be three more, and you’ll like the next one.” I felt that very much about *Heidi*.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Wasserstein often tracks her characters at transitional moments, when they wonder whether or not they’re “in life” now. As Heidi tells Scoop in *The Heidi Chronicles*, “Scoop, we’re out of school. We’re in life. You don’t have to grade everything” (201).

⁵⁶ Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, “[In]Visible Alliances: Conflicting ‘Chronicles’ of Feminism,” in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 286.

⁵⁷ Gayle Austin, review, “*The Heidi Chronicles* by Wendy Wasserstein,” *Theatre Journal* 42, no. 1 (1990): 108.

⁵⁸ See Kobena Mercer, “The Burden of Representation,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁹ Quoted in Savran, *The Playwright’s Voice*, 303.

From this remove, I think Wasserstein was right; it is always the women who the media fashion as exemplary who bear the wrath of people who could be their peers and supporters. Remember Kate Millett's public vilification by her fellow feminists when her ground-breaking critical study *Sexual Politics* was published in 1970: because her book was the first to launch a feminist critique in a wide mainstream forum, and because the media recreated her as a celebrity, movement feminists trashed Millett for selling out. In retrospect, the story of Wasserstein's feminist critical treatment sounds remarkably similar.

Third

A closer look at her last play demonstrates the impact of Wasserstein's popularity and the importance of her work in bringing public attention to debates within and about American feminism. The play also illustrates the complications of allying with her work as a second wave feminist, as *Third* epitomizes her double-edged critique of my own political generation. *Third* continues in the realist, sardonically comic tradition that marked her style, and in many ways echoes the preoccupations of her early work. The play revisits a feminist professor (now of literature) safely tenured at a small Ivy League school of the sort that uncommon women attend. But this time, a male student named Third has his say, launching a liberal critique of protagonist Laurie Jameson's cultural feminist analysis of *King Lear* and other canonical literature. Wasserstein offers a complicated portrait of a feminist academic stuck in what she portrays as shopworn suspicion of dominant male power. Feminism is indeed "spent" in *Third*. Reading and watching two productions of the play, I found myself infuriated once again by Wasserstein's insistence on making a committed feminist the butt of her jokes. But as I reread the play and contemplated these two very different productions, my ambivalence was tempered by acknowledging that the play also stages a conversation about the limits of entrenched belief and the potential transformations in middle-aged, intellectual women's lives in a way rarely seen in commercial theatre, even though, again, it maintains a fairly conventional realist form.⁶⁰

Third premiered at the Lincoln Center Theatre in New York in September 2005, directed by Broadway regular and Wasserstein's frequent collaborator, Daniel Sullivan. The Lincoln Center production starred Dianne Wiest as Laurie Jameson, Jason Ritter (John's son) as Third, and Amy Aquino as Jameson's friend, Nancy. Wasserstein establishes a conflict of wills between Jameson—a long-tenured feminist literature professor—and Woodson Bull III, otherwise known as Third—a white male student who is enrolled in her Shakespeare class, whom she accuses of plagiarizing an important assignment. Laurie is fifty-four-years-old, dresses in a funky retro style, and, according to Wasserstein's stage direction, "takes very good care of her skin."⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Third's* look at an openly menopausal woman mirrors television's recent interest in similarly middle-aged yet compelling female characters. A recent spate of such popular cultural representations comes to mind, from Kyra Sedgwick's tour de force turn as Brenda in *The Closer*, to Holly Hunter's sexy romp on *Saving Grace*, to Glenn Close's tough-as-nails, menopausal power-monger in *Damages*, and Mary Louise Parker's weary cynic in *Weeds*. Middle-aged women also carry leading roles in the exuberant silliness and sexual liberation of the 2008 film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Mamma Mia!* These representations offer a rich site for further feminist critical investigation.

⁶¹ *Third*, *American Theatre Magazine* (April 2006), 72. All other references will appear in the text. Note that this parenthetical remark reveals as much about Wasserstein and what she observes about people as it does about the character.

As the play opens, Laurie is teaching her own idiosyncratic interpretation of *King Lear* and Third, who is on the school wrestling team and in her class, realizes he has an assignment scheduling problem that requires special dispensation, which Laurie refuses. When he does turn in his work Laurie believes he has plagiarized the paper, since she can't imagine that an athlete like Third—whom she also assumes is rich and probably a “legacy” student—could also be smart. From there, the play pits the two against each other, using their disputation to question how a veteran feminist teacher becomes trapped by her own dogma. Wasserstein also uses the play to think through what it means to age—physically, politically, and intellectually—and to ponder the pitfalls of trying to paint widespread social change from the limited palette of an academic institution.

As in all her plays, Wasserstein also probes the mother–daughter relationship and explores the limits of female friendship. Rather than the more typical central character of women's drama portrayed as a daughter struggling to overcome the burden of a suffocating mother, in *Third*, it is the central character, Laurie, against whom her post-feminist, third-wave daughter Emily lobs criticisms and complaints. Likewise, although Laurie and her colleague Nancy (who not incidentally suffers from cancer)⁶² exemplify the female friendships typical of Wasserstein's work, their relationship in the play is difficult, less pliant and secure than her usual women duos. Third and Laurie's elderly father are the play's only male characters. But unfortunately and not surprisingly, given the realist form, Third is the play's change-agent, as its women mainly react to his observations and choices. That the other men in *Third* are too compromised to act is another aspect of Wasserstein's critique. Laurie's husband is a political science professor, whose adequacy as a scholar and a man is regularly doubted; in fact, he's never seen, remaining an invisible (though audible) presence whose choices complement Laurie's. Laurie's father, Jack, serves as the play's Lear-like patriarch, but he suffers from advanced Alzheimer's, so although he speaks certain truths, his credibility is nil. *Third* focuses on Laurie, but other characters propel her eventual transformation by commenting on her choices and judging her motives.

Like most of Wasserstein's plays, *Third* rejects subtext and psychology. In Wasserstein's Shavian style, Laurie shares three thoughtful monologues—similar to the two that Heidi Holland performs in *The Heidi Chronicles*—that locate her commitments and her excesses and forward the play's action. Wasserstein uses these speeches to extend Laurie's personality beyond the fourth wall, addressing the audience either as students in her class or as the spectators they are. In her monologue at the beginning of the play, Laurie speaks to her students, announcing her goal for her class: “Our job here is to renew our scholarship by eliminating any heterosexist, racist or classist barriers. Rest assured, this classroom is a hegemonic-free zone” (72). In her next monologue, during Third's hearing before the ethics committee near the end of the first act, Laurie sweats profusely, either because of the situation, or menopause, or both. Removing her soaking shirt, she launches into a fantasy—Third and Nancy freeze and the stage lights dim during her monologue—in which she confesses directly to the audience her desire to hold Woodson Bull the Third accountable in a way that she can't hold accountable the country's president or vice president.

⁶²Wasserstein was already ill with lymphoma when the play was in rehearsals, but she saw it through previews and opening night.

By her third and final monologue, Laurie's lecture to her class detours into a tangent about her relationship with her husband. When she realizes how far the personal has intruded into the professional, she apologizes sheepishly and ends the class early. These speeches let Wasserstein reveal to the audience what Laurie thinks and feels. They represent the "telling" that Wasserstein used throughout her career to make a pact with the audience, to invite them in, to preach to a presumptively converted, liberal audience who will ridicule feminist excess while feeling good about its commitment to empowering women. While I do not condone her tendency to belittle certain kinds of feminism, I do think these monologues make her realism pedagogical—hardly a Brechtian learning play, but intent on teaching us something (and something about women) nonetheless. These speeches extract Laurie from the play to reveal her intellect, her seething rage, and her thwarted desires, making her vulnerable to the audience but protecting her from her fellow characters. With these choices Wasserstein actually takes care of Laurie, handling her more gently and with less irony than she did Professor Holland in her earlier play.

No secrets or deep psychology add nuance or complexity to *Third*; only the question of whether or not Third plagiarized his paper on *Lear* propels the action. As the debate about Laurie's charge simmers and flares, Third presents evidence against Laurie and her accusations and, at least implicitly, against feminism writ large. Third accuses Laurie of reverse discrimination, insisting that, "You have a problem with me because I'm happy. . . . I'm straight. I'm white. I'm male . . . why are you wasting time on someone as insignificant as me? If you're angry, pick on someone powerful" (79). But Third also implies that power is not suffused across identity positions, that his identity means nothing socially. Wasserstein suggests that Laurie over-reads and Third under-reads the complexities and influence of identity vectors.

Third-wave feminism in many ways opened doors for students like Third, who is able to enroll in classes like Laurie's (along with the gay and lesbian literature class he also takes) with the entitlement of someone for whom identity politics have faded, and for whom the lives of aboriginal lesbians and even middle-class, aging, white feminist women are fair game for any student to consider. (Wasserstein makes the aboriginal lesbian, whose memoir Third reads in his gay and lesbian literature class, the unfortunate butt of too many jokes here, letting the reference evolve until the woman, "Pinky," becomes an offensively tidy mascot at whom the white characters scoff.) But without a foundation in emotional and political identification, these courses become as academic for Third as his Shakespeare class. Third's ecumenical magnanimity makes him seem liberal, but part of Laurie's accusation is that he can't possibly, truly understand what it means to read *Lear* from a feminist perspective the way she can, given that she is living her own version, playing Cordelia to her father's mad king. For Third, his paper successfully engages original ideas, but the only way Laurie can read his work is as inauthentic, since she doesn't believe he can possibly understand her life.

Third investigates these conflicting values and principles but also meditates on larger questions of belief. Faith stands as an open though pressing question in the play. Although her friend Nancy accuses Laurie of being a "religious cynic," she notes that Laurie is "the one who always had faith in the future and the work we had to do" (85). Her remark resonates with Scoop's, who told Heidi in *Chronicles* that she and other "true-believing girls" would have a long, hard way to go because of their confidence in

the possibility of feminist transformation.⁶³ Wasserstein tries to distinguish faith from dogma, pondering how to move beyond entrenched truths that no longer illuminate people's lives as history moves forward. But faith hovers over the play as an urgent necessity. By faith, I'm not referring to religion; in fact, *Third's* characters lack ethnic flavor. Laurie Jameson, like Heidi Holland, is a non-Jewish character. Perhaps Wasserstein wanted to reach for the universal here in ways that the Borscht Belt inflections of characters like those in *Isn't it Romantic* or *The Sisters Rosensweig* would disallow.⁶⁴ Faith, after all, is a more general pursuit than the particularities of religion, especially one as culturally and socially marked—with its accents and gestures, its shtetl-hewn tribalisms and attachments to subaltern history—as Judaism.

Third's realism allows it to play to mainstream theatre audiences, and its nonethnic humor makes its ideas easily digestible.⁶⁵ The play has been performed by a number of regional theatres across the country during the last several years. I saw the 2007 Geffen Theatre production in Los Angeles starring Christine Lahti and directed by Maria Mileaf, which suffered from a sit-com effect that made the play seem flip and superior about the feminist lives it describes.⁶⁶ Lahti played Laurie as a self-deprecating smart woman; the role read differently from Heidi (which she also performed on Broadway, after Joan Allen originated the role), in that Laurie is not the shrinking spectator of her own life.⁶⁷ But Lahti's physical elegance (and desperate thinness), decorated in the Geffen production with stylish, contemporary clothes, and her habit of laughing off Laurie's seriousness of purpose by undercutting her lines with raised eyebrows and chuckles, meant that Lahti embraced too heartily the irony that Laurie eschews at the play's end. At the Geffen, Wasserstein's play became the vehicle for a fierce third-wave feminist critique of the second wave, because it positioned Laurie as inherently sympathetic to the criticisms of her post-feminist daughter and Third. Lahti's Laurie didn't transform—she capitulated, giving in to a harsh critique of her own values. Matt Czuchry, who played Third, offered a weak, vague performance that made him an unworthy adversary, and Jayne Brook, as Nancy, didn't provide much of a foil for Laurie's ambivalence. Even her daughter, played by Sarah Drew, sounded whiny rather than thoughtful as she rejected her mother's life choices.

⁶³ In their very first scene together, Scoop predicts of Heidi: "You'll be one of those true believers who didn't understand it was all just a phase" (*The Heidi Chronicles*, 173). By the play's last scene, Scoop affirms his prescience, telling Heidi: "So I was right all along. You were a true believer" (*The Heidi Chronicles*, 247).

⁶⁴ Obviously, Wasserstein knew how Jewishness inflected her work. Bigsby reports that she "has also expressed suspicion that the success of *The Heidi Chronicles* may have in part been due to the fact that the central character was a Gentile girl from Chicago. It wasn't about Wendy with the hips from New York, even if Wendy with the hips from New York had the same emotional life" (quoted in "Wendy Wasserstein," 332).

⁶⁵ As Jan Balakian wrote of *The Sisters Rosensweig*, it's a play "of the sort Wasserstein saw as a girl in New York, one that makes us laugh a little, sigh a little, and go home feeling that despite life's confusion and pain, things will somehow work out"; see Balakian, "Wendy Wasserstein: A Feminist Voice from the Seventies to the Present," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, 224. The same structure of feeling is provoked by *Third*.

⁶⁶ The production was particularly disappointing, since Mileaf had recently been hailed as an up-and-coming woman director; see, for example, <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/Oct07/mileaf.cfm> (accessed 21 July, 2008). For an in-depth analysis of the production, see my November 8, 2007 blog entry, "Performance Contexts: Wendy Wasserstein's *Third* in Los Angeles," *The Feminist Spectator*, available at www.feministspectator.blogspot.com.

⁶⁷ Lahti's work in the Wasserstein opus also includes her performance as Lyssa Dent Hughes in the television film of *An American Daughter* (2000), for which she received a Golden Globe nomination.

In the Philadelphia Theatre Company (PTC) production of *Third*, which I saw in the spring of 2008, Lizbeth MacKay played Laurie with a completely different investment in the character's commitments. From her first monologue, in which Laurie addresses her class with her feminist critique of *King Lear*, MacKay's choices clarified the idealism that Laurie demonstrates throughout. In the PTC production, Laurie started the play in an ankle-length jean skirt, wearing a loose-fitting top adorned with the chunky turquoise jewelry favored by progressive women of a certain age. Her graying hair was pulled back from her face, but cascaded down her back in the long, loose style of 1970s feminists. She looked like someone who's been on the battle lines of the women's movement, her world-weariness showing on her face. When Laurie reassured her class—and MacKay her audience—that the course will be a “hegemony-free” zone, she meant it, making spectators here much less inclined to laugh at the notion that such an ideologically safer space is possible. In the Geffen production, Lahti, performing Laurie, chuckled knowingly at “hegemony-free” zone, bringing the audience into the joke she made of the line, and held the performer blameless for her character's ideology. The PTC production addressed the play's concerns with more sincerity than irony. Will Fowler played Third as truly wounded by Laurie's plagiarism accusation, offended that his earnest intellectual talents could be suspected. When at the play's end he confessed that Laurie's attentions, though negative, made him more interesting than he'll probably ever be again, the actor delivered his lines ruefully, as if to acknowledge how bankrupt is the position of unmarked male, white, middle-class, heterosexual power in a world that's so culturally and politically diverse. Third's losses in the PTC production couldn't be cut by the Pyrrhic victory of his exoneration by the college ethics committee; he returns reluctantly to the fold of normativity that even he knows is too barren to embrace. He plans to break up with a girlfriend who has already written their life scenario with the predictable plot of middle-class white propriety secured. Even Third can't go along with the ruse that there's no “outside” to that story—even Third, in this production, wants more from his life. But because the play's inexorable realism prevails, he is still the voice of reason against what the play considers Laurie's feminist excesses.

Nancy was played by an African American actor, a casting choice that also gave the production more nuance and relevance (although the night I attended, the PTC audience was overwhelmingly white, with only a handful of obviously African American spectators). Perhaps because of their racial differences, the skirmishes Nancy and Laurie withstand appeared more fraught and the expense of being on opposite sides of important issues much higher. When they return to an uneasy though hopeful solidarity by the play's end, agreeing to forgive each other for their disagreements and betrayals, the two characters illustrate the fragility of relationships not just between women, but between women who are different in as many ways as they are similar. The compromise was harder won, its import more fundamental.⁶⁸

The mother-daughter relationship in the PTC production also underlined the complexities of reconciling second- and third-wave feminism. Because Laurie was played less as a successful, corporate working woman (as Lahti styled the character) than she

⁶⁸ The fact that Nancy falls in love with a rabbi at the play's end meant that in this production, as in *An American Daughter*, it's the African American female performer who bears the burden of all and any ethnicity in the play, including Jewishness.

was an academic, intellectual CNN junkie, and because the daughter, played here by Jennifer Blood, was performed with complex vulnerability more than flip disregard for her mother's choices, the two actors managed to illuminate the conflict between feminist generations in a way that also heightened its importance. When Emily rejects Laurie's values, insisting she doesn't want to embrace her mother's rigid dogmatism or her exacting, narrow definitions of political efficacy, the younger woman is left wondering how she will fill the hole her choice will leave in her life. Emily more incisively critiques her mother's pretensions in this production—Laurie's name-dropping, her supercilious, unthinking class snobbery, and her thwarted academic ambitions—but the daughter is left wondering with what new values she will replace them. As she walks away from her Swarthmore education to live with an older man who is a bank teller, Emily's third-wave feminism offers her less security than her critique of her mother's second-wave values might assume: What she is leaving behind is clear, but what she is moving toward looks murky and uncertain.

In the PTC production, although the relationship between Laurie and Emily remains tense, the actors' choices illustrated how Laurie and Third grudgingly learn from each other. While they don't reconcile in the end, they reluctantly admit that they've forced each other out of their respective comfort zones with transformative results. Laurie's plan to take an extended leave of absence signals her new willingness to escape the narrow confines of her worldview. Third decides to enroll at his state university, but he will return home understanding that he can't escape the cultural power of his gender privilege, however little it actually suits him.

Although neither production tries to undermine the play's governing genre, I do not find Wasserstein's use of realism as irredeemable as I did twenty years ago. While all of realism's problems remain—its installation of the enigma that requires purging, the gendered imbalance of its power hierarchies, its restoration of the status quo, and other of its famous faults—the rules about how it is used have loosened. Just as the sharp distinctions among the feminisms have now usefully blurred, realism, too, is often bent and stylized in ways that poke holes in parts of its ideological armor. Even here, in *Third*, Laurie's menopausal monologue during the ethics hearing is a flight of fancy that subtly breaks the fourth wall. While realism might never achieve the cutting critical edge of more Brechtian epic drama, playwrights more frequently fragment its once coherent characters with touches of expressionism and the absurd. Because television and the new media have splintered spectators' attention spans and required us to move our focus among multiple, conflicting screens and images simultaneously, contemporary realism can't afford to be as static and definitive—performatively or ideologically—as it once was. The feminist critique of realism has been crucial in discussions of theatre and performance, and can now expand its terms and criteria as the genre also becomes more fluid.

The individualism realism promotes remains a problem. The PTC production cast several young actors as stray "students," using them to move furniture between scenes and to perform small gestures of campus life during transitions. They toss Frisbees and footballs, tease and flirt, and otherwise draw in broad strokes the interactions of young people on a quad between classes. The choice situated the play nicely in the tumult of its campus environment, if not exactly in a more specifically drawn historical moment. But Laurie Jameson was still left alone, the isolated elder stateswoman rushing purposefully along ivy-lined paths to and from her classes. Because realist narratives

require conflict, characters like Nancy and Laurie must be at odds before they can find their way back toward each other at the end. Laurie is forced to examine her choices in isolation, to suffer her daughter's rejection and her student's wrath without a best friend, let alone a larger community, to which to turn. *Third* writes feminism on the individual instead of a collective, leaving Laurie to reassess her commitments alone. Third-wave feminists might learn from second wavers that wanting equality for women doesn't have to be an isolated, individual struggle.

Toward the end of her life, Wasserstein confessed that her plays were becoming less autobiographical and more concerned with the history of her own ideas.⁶⁹ *Third* addresses gender as both a site of identification and as a scene of struggle over affiliations in the social imagination, positioning Wasserstein as a playwright engaged in public conversations about political and personal issues. The play opens ways of thinking about social concerns that other popular media rarely consider. Wasserstein once told an interviewer:

The theatre is not television. Not as many people will ever see my plays in one night. But what you can do with theatre because it's not a big business initially—even when it is big business it's not big like the other things—you can begin to say things that then sort of filter into the culture. I think that's a good thing.⁷⁰

Reconsidering Feminism

What feminist critics like myself once saw as Wasserstein's rejection of feminism now seems to me a rather true portrait of the tension between realizing and valuing women's social differences and wanting to be part of something intimately, rightfully, largely human. In fact, perhaps Laurie Jameson's hard-won realization that the rigidity of her worldview has begun to corrupt her perspective mirrors my own change of heart about liberal feminism and even about realism. I admit, with some chagrin, that I identify with the character; after all, I'm a middle-aged, female feminist college professor. How can this play not speak on some level to those of us who, like Laurie Jameson, view our teaching as part of our social activism? I bristle when Wasserstein positions Laurie as an anti-example—as a feminist trapped by her own blind spots who needs to be taught a lesson or two about compassion and political generosity. I resent that spectators are encouraged to sneer at Laurie's extremes, and to applaud her choice to let go of what the play considers her harshest feminist assumptions. But I am also aware that my argument in this essay represents a change of heart about the limits of dogmatic thinking and the need to let our perspectives transform more fluidly, similar to the one Laurie experiences in *Third*. I, too, find myself a "true believer," and very much want to practice my faith and belief in the power of ideas to change social relationships. After many years working to achieve these goals, I appreciate a play that even attempts to study what this kind of political faith might mean and the costs those of us who hold it incur. I follow Wasserstein's critique of Laurie's identificatory strategies as one of her missteps in the way she does not think *Third* can truly understand her life. But I do identify with Laurie, even as I see how the play charts the limits of identification against a more productive choice to empathize and affiliate across social difference.

⁶⁹ See Savran, *The Playwright's Voice*, 307.

⁷⁰ Czekay, "Interview with Wendy Wasserstein," 50.

I still find *The Heidi Chronicles* a flawed play, one whose disavowal of feminism when it was first produced damaged perceptions of what was still, then, a thriving social movement. But Wasserstein's writing changed over time. What many once viewed as her insufferable upper-class white privilege evolved into sharply drawn satire of that stratum's excessive wealth and social acquisitiveness.⁷¹ As Bigsby suggests:

Beneath the humour, the failed ideologies and even the legitimate crusades, what lies at the heart of her work is the dilemma of the individual, alone even in the company of others, struggling to make sense of a personal life, conscious of passing time, negotiating with the competing demands of those around her and finally making the only commitment which matters, namely to the need to shape her life into a form in which she can take pride.⁷²

This individualism is exactly what makes Wasserstein's work so frustrating for critics who would prefer to see feminism as a movement in which women find camaraderie in gender identifications, and knowledge about how the world works from empathizing through their differences. They are indeed fiercely individualist, but at least Wasserstein scrutinizes her characters' choices to ask: How do we do good in the world? How can we make progressive social change happen from within existing political systems? In what sphere can women operate most effectively to influence public opinion? How can women conduct their lives ethically and honorably without being blinkered and hobbled by values that calcify, as *Third* suggests? Wasserstein and other playwrights working in commercial, popular theatre advance conversations that matter about women's status and desires, their work and dreams. Their plays might be liberal, but surely, they're feminist too.

⁷¹ Her insights into the community of which she both was and wasn't a part were crowned by her 2006 posthumously published novel, *Elements of Style* (New York: Knopf, 2006)—a vicious parody of a group of self-serving, social-climbing, Upper East Side white New Yorkers and their vacuous, sometimes violent ambitions.

⁷² Bigsby, "Wendy Wasserstein," 367.