

The Brooklyn Rail

Two for the Time: Reviving Susan Glaspell in New York

ALEXIS CLEMENTS

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Last fall, the writers Julia Jordan, Sarah Schulman and Anna Ziegler called a town hall meeting for female playwrights to discuss the fact that work written by women was being produced at rates no better than 100 years earlier. The news was not a surprise so much as a reminder of the complacency that allowed momentum to falter after the slight gains made in the 1970s and 80s. There has been a great deal of discussion over the past year around the topic of why women's work (as well as work by minority writers) isn't being produced more and how to change that reality. One of the more difficult questions in this debate is how, as an artist who has been systematically excluded from mainstream conversations, you can both work to make sure your voice is heard and, perhaps more importantly, continue to use and develop that voice in spite of the realities you face.

Interestingly, these are some of the same struggles that playwright Susan Glaspell faced in the early decades of the 20th century. Lucky for her, and for all of us, Glaspell's was one of the voices that broke through. Her work was critically lauded in her time, garnering her, among other things, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. She was also a co-founder of the Provincetown Players, a group that helped to redefine American theater. Unlucky for Glaspell, much of her work died with her. Most of her plays and all of her fiction went out of print shortly after her death in 1948, and little attention was paid to her oeuvre until university gender studies programs began to revive her work through the later decades of the 20th century.

Now, nearly 100 years after their first productions, two of Glaspell's plays are being produced in New York at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, both directed by women. The first production is *The Verge* running November 5-21, directed by Alice Reagan for Performance Lab 115, an actor-led company where she's a resident artist. The second production — of Glaspell's most famous work, *Trifles* — runs February 4-20, directed by Brooke O'Harra and co-produced by the Ontological and Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf.

Both plays were written in roughly the same period for the Provincetown Players. *Trifles* was first performed in 1916 when the group was still working out of the Wharf Theater in Provincetown, Massachusetts. *The Verge* received its first production in 1921 when the group began producing at their playhouse in New York. More importantly, though, both plays directly address the question of a woman's presumed role in society and the deliberate defiance of that role by characters in each play. *The Verge*, as Reagan put in when I spoke to her about the production, concerns, among other things, "a woman caught in a context in which she's trying to define her life and being thwarted at every step." *Trifles* tackles the notion of women exploiting expectations about women's roles to thwart a murder investigation. What's also important and interesting about both plays is that at the same time they challenge the roles of women, they also experiment with form. It's these formal innovations that, according to my conversations with both directors, were the most significant reasons they chose to direct the plays. For Reagan, "the juicy part of why to do the play is that [Glaspell] throws these styles together in an absolutely modern, fragmented way. *The Verge* is packed full of text with ideas and Freudian psychology. You've got melodrama, you've got Greek tragedy by the end of the play, you've got expressionism, and you've got comedy of manners." I sat in for a section of a rehearsal with Performance Lab 115 and watched as the actors and Reagan played with theatrical styles, looking for ways to allow the play's conversation about style to inform the simultaneous conversation about the struggles of the characters in the play. It's a heady trick, but there's a lot of interesting work being done with it.

For O’Harra, who will begin rehearsals for *Trifles* later in the year, the play was something she became interested in while constructing a course on feminism and form at Mount Holyoke College, where she is currently a full-time professor. “I was looking at plays that were written by American women, both older plays and contemporary plays, where the form of the play is the essence of the play as opposed to narrative.” Where Reagan has chosen to trim the full-length *The Verge*, O’Harra is expanding the one act *Trifles* in order to hone in on the lives, both internal and external, of the play’s four characters. She’s interested in the moments during which the characters empathize with one another despite the psychic gulfs between them. Expanding on this notion, O’Harra described one aspect of the tension in the play that translates well to the contemporary world: “It’s interesting because in the play you feel like even the husband and wife have a strange kind of intimacy. That they keep to themselves within that. Even the two women in the room keep to themselves. Do we keep ourselves isolated? Do we keep away a certain kind of intimacy?”

Both companies have a history of putting on challenging and important work, and it will be exciting to see what they bring out of these too-long neglected works. It’s also interesting to look at these two directors seeking to make work on their own terms. As with the Provincetown Players, who in seeking to redefine the art form were compelled to create a completely new theater outside of New York stages, these two companies and directors have long been producing their own work, finding their own way in the shifting theatrical landscape. And perhaps that’s one of the keys to making sure you can survive as an artist despite the tremendous hurdles for voices that have traditionally been kept off of main stages. As O’Harra noted about *Glaspell*: “She totally did it her own way. They made their own system. And I’m sure that’s for a reason, because there’s a need for it and the model doesn’t exist. You have to create your own model. It’s not because you’re an anarchist, it’s because you understand what it takes to make the work you’re interested in.”