Rape on the Contemporary Stage
Lisa Fitzpatrick

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The starting point for this research was the project *Women Writing Rape*, conceived and coordinated by Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson at the University of Warwick in 2007, which called for responses to two essays by Sharon Marcus (1992) and Carine Mardorossian (2002). These essays, which remain central to this book, raised questions of women’s silence around rape and sexual assault, the ways that rape might be understood as a process of imposing or reinscribing gender normativity, and the conception of rape as a social script. My contribution to that project was a conference paper and an essay on representations of rape on stage, published in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives* (Routledge, 2010). Once I had begun to look for plays that represented rape, however, I found that the issue recurred over and over in writing for performance by both men and women. Rape is referenced in twentieth-century plays from Brecht to Denis Potter to Harold Pinter, and from Tennessee Williams to Trevor Griffiths, though often only in passing, as a minor detail that reveals something about a character or a situation. It may function as a metaphor for defeat or colonization (Howard Brenton, Bill Morrison), or as a shock tactic expressing hopelessness or rage, as in the ‘in-yer-face’ playwrights of the 1990s, or witnessing rape may be a defining experience for the male protagonist. It is present in comedy as well as tragedy, in the ‘bed trick’ and in various guises that lead the hero to win the heart of the female character. It is a recurring trope in the work of women dramatists, both historically and on the contemporary stage. Indeed it is so present in women’s writing that it seems that many women writers find it imperative to explore this issue in their dramaturgy and their artistic practice, as
Lizbeth Goodman has suggested. Representations of sexual violence are also ubiquitous in film and television, often sensationalized, and often used in publicity to attract an audience, which is nothing new: images of dishevelled heroines struggling against an assailant were used to promote melodramas in the nineteenth century. Sexual violence repels and horrifies but it also fascinates. There is scopophilic pleasure, of course, in all kinds of violence; this is an enduring feature of mimetic entertainment. It is not surprising that sexual violence, so closely aligned with popular understanding of romance and passion, so embedded in normative conceptions of active powerful masculinity and delicate femininity, should hold an enduring appeal.

This study explores rape on the contemporary stage, starting with Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* and a selection of its translations and adaptations. Strindberg’s naturalistic tragedy continues to attract theatre-makers and theatre audiences, based in part on the uncertainty whether this is a story about rape or about seduction. Subsequent chapters examine women’s representations of rape from the beginnings of feminist theatre to the present day; the representation of rape in wartime; the tangled cultural conceptions of eroticism, vulnerability and affect, and recent work which brings personal experience to the public stage. The aim of the work is to examine how cultural beliefs about rape—though often false—are communicated, reinscribed, and sometimes interrogated and protested, in live performance. It also aims to open further discussion of the representation of rape in performance, and the ways in which performance might be used to contribute to anti-rape activism.

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