

## April de Angelis

*Rebecca D'Monté*

*Ironmistress; Hush; Playhouse Creatures; A Laughing Matter; Amongst Friends*

### Introduction

April de Angelis was born in London in 1960 to an English mother and Italian father. All of the decisions made about where she trained and worked, as well as the plays themselves, speak of her lifelong concerns with feminism, history, and community, and her work is informed by connections between chronology and narration, power and subjugation. De Angelis was at the Old Vic Youth Theatre as a teenager, before studying at the E15 Acting School in London. She joined Monstrous Regiment as an actress, then as actress/deviser with ReSisters theatre group, and it is no coincidence that the names of these companies also act as forceful political statements. Her first work in 1986 was *Breathless*, joint winner of the Second Wave Women's Writing Festival.<sup>1</sup> In 1987 she wrote *Women in Law*, followed by *Me* (1988), *Wanderlust*, and *Bombshell* (1989). *Visitants* won the Young Writers for Radio Festival on BBC Radio 4 in 1988, with another radio play, *The Outlander*, appearing as a two-part serial for Radio 5 in 1991.<sup>2</sup> A year later she was Winner of the Writer's Guild Award.

Like many dramatists of her generation, de Angelis was deeply affected by the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s, and while her 1989 play, *Ironmistress*, is set in the industrialisation of the Victorian age, it also comments on the 'ironmistress' Margaret Thatcher, then ruling the country. From *Hush* (1992) onwards de Angelis, along with many other of the earlier feminist playwrights started to move beyond representing the oppression of women to a broader and more complex social and political agenda. If *Hush* charts a disengagement by younger people with the loss of direction by the Left and the lack of anything to take its place, *The Positive Hour* (1997) shows the legacy of ideological feminism and failures of New Labour, whilst *Soft Vengeance* (1993), for the disabled-led theatre company, Graeae, melds the personal and political through the bomb injuries suffered by activist Albie Sachs in 1960s Apartheid South Africa.

In 1990 she became Writer-in-Residence at Paines Plough, with *Crux*, a play about Marguarite Porete and a group of free thinking religious women in the Medieval

period. This continues, for de Angelis, an overt concern with history, invariably in the form of literary adaptations and real lives, as a way to show connections of power dynamics across time, or to explore the ‘invisibility’ of women: what early feminist critics have termed ‘her-story.’ Similar plays include *Frankenstein* (1989), *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill* (1991), *The Warwickshire Testimony* (1999), and *Wuthering Heights* (2008).

Perhaps her most celebrated work came in 1993, with *Playhouse Creatures*. This was about the difficulties faced by the first actresses to appear on the English stage: the film, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), covered some of the same issues of gender, sexuality and the theatre, as did Nicholas Wright’s stage work, *Warning, Boys at Play* (2000), which looked back to the early boy actors. Interest in aspects of theatre and performance continued in *A Laughing Matter* (2002), which won the Whatsonstage Theatregoers’ Choice award for best new comedy. About the attempts of Oliver Goldsmith to have his play *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) staged by David Garrick, this was presented by Max Stafford-Clark in tandem with Goldsmith’s comedy, similar to the director’s pairing of George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* in 1988. De Angelis’s continued fascination with the meaning of theatre showed itself in a commission for the British Film Industry and Channel 4 in 1995, *Aristophanes: The Gods are Laughing*.

With *Wild East* (2005), a disquietening look at the ways in which history works against three individuals, and *Headstrong* (2004), set aboard an opium clipper in the China Seas, April de Angelis’s work endeavours to engage with topical events. She has also become further involved with collaborative projects, and in experimenting with different theatrical forms. *Catch* (2006) is about identity theft and the violent repercussions felt in society when its youth feel disempowered. Written in conjunction with four other female playwrights, Stella Feehily, Tanika Gupta, Chloe Moss and Laura Wade, it was designed to celebrate fifty years of experimental work at the Royal Court, as well as to provide a homage to *Lay By* (1971) by Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddart and Snoo Wilson: the replacement of a group of male dramatists by female dramatists seems significant of the gradual inroads women have made into British theatre during the last forty years. *2006* (2006) was part of Theatre 503’s bringing together of ten playwrights in its ‘Decade’ season: de Angelis’s play depicts the escape of Natascha Kampusch from her Austrian kidnapper. The interplay between imprisonment,

security and fear is also taken up in the opera *Silent Twins* in 2007, which explores the strange, silent world of arsonist twins in 1980s Broadmoor psychiatric hospital, and the gated residence in *Amongst Friends* (2009) is emblematic of the results of years of materialism and indifference shown to social minorities, as well as the culture of paranoia engendered by 9/11 and 7/7.

De Angelis has written three libretti, *Pig* (1992) and *Greed* (1993), and *Flight* (1998) with composer Jonathan Dove. She has also taught playwriting at a number of institutions, including the University of Birmingham, the Royal Court's Young Writing Programme, and the Royal Court International in Cuba, India, Mexico, and Africa.

## **The Plays**

### *Ironmistress* (1989)

*Ironmistress*, commissioned by ReSisters, and directed by Anna Birch at the Young Vic on 24 January 1989, was de Angelis's first important work, and the one that brought her to the attention of the mainstream. She notes that 'When I was writing it I was trying to break away from the issue-based, "agit-prop" style that a lot of theatre groups with strong political intentions had adopted for themselves:' instead, she wanted to write something deliberately 'theatrical' in style.<sup>3</sup> In her concern with nuances of gender and power, de Angelis designed Martha Darby – based on a real-life nineteenth-century woman – to be unsympathetic and even 'blameworthy as a patriarchal figure.'<sup>4</sup> Taking over her husband's iron foundry after his death, Martha finally has power after years spent lying 'in a box./Padded and quiet' (p. 41), but now her days are spent providing equipment for a war-making machine over which she has no control. The name of her daughter, Little Cog, symbolically describes the whole play, where in the global market place, everyone exists only as part of a 'giant machine' (p. 12). Although Margaret Thatcher is not mentioned, the play's poetic force suggests the debasement of society through capitalism and the search for a more empowering form of femininity.

This is dramatised through the games they play on the eve of Little Cog's wedding. The daughter's rich imagination, a symbol for the process of theatre itself, conjures up the subversive figure of Shanny Pinns, an exploited former foundry worker who has

died of starvation. Little Cog sees her as the embodiment both of the limitations of women's lives and as the anarchic spirit of the underclass. Reinventing her as a highwaywoman, still free to roam the hills and to seek revenge against the rich, 'Little Cog transforms Shanny's life, at least in imagination, from one of helpless privation to a tale of heroic daring and rebellion.'<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, stuck in reality, Little Cog has come to understand that female sexuality has become debased, nothing more than a conduit for male pleasure and power. After the wedding, she describes how her husband treated her like a machine, and when her virginity was taken from her, the blood ran like 'melted iron' (p. 57). Shanny Pinns's body was used to mould an iron statue of a woman, represented on stage through the projection of Little Cog's shadow on corrugated iron, and although it is polished and loved, Shanny Pinns says, the face said 'Nothing.' (p. 49).

Male fantasy, social convention and global capitalisation are seen as imprisoning to women, rendering them passive and silent; in contrast, female imagination has the power to liberate them. At the end, Little Cog in the guise of Shanny Pinns, dreams of life in the next century, when metal birds will fly through the air, transporting her to a different kind of life. In this way, de Angelis gives voice to 'women marginalized and abandoned by mid-nineteenth-century industrial "progress," ' while simultaneously providing caustic commentary on the contemporary situation at the time of writing.<sup>6</sup>

### *Hush* (1992)

Première at the Royal Court on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1992, *Hush* was de Angelis's first experience of working with the director Max Stafford-Clark, and his rigorous rehearsal practices forced her to think constantly about her characters' motivations.<sup>7</sup> The play represented a departure for de Angelis, where she wanted 'to ask different questions' and to 'explore my response to Britain today from outside the spectrum of the position of women in society.'<sup>8</sup> Although still describing herself as a feminist, this work moved away from 'issue-based' theatre towards what Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge call 'the inadequacy of individual responses and isolated, ideological solutions to the world problems we have today.'<sup>9</sup> Portraying the troubled lives of alienated young people, similar to those who haunt the works of Judy Upton, one of the key in-her-face dramatists of the 1990s, it takes as its central plot line the anniversary of Jo's disappearance, and the reminiscences of friends and family,

particularly her daughter Rosa and sister Louise, who gather near to the shoreline where she has possibly drowned.

The stage area is divided into two parts, the house and the beach: '*The rooms look dusty, un-lived in. The beach may encroach upon the house surrealistically,*' (p. 75), the first production using the sound of waves as a constant background. The setting is symbolic, with one character mentioning that 'A lot of rich bastards live round here. They creep down from the cities. To escape the mess they've made. It's like an infection' (p. 96). As with Upton, for whom the seaside 'represents escape. The sea is... literally, the end of the line,' de Angelis's play is populated by those who are similarly running from life.<sup>10</sup> The personal loss the group has suffered is set against individual disappointments; for example, Denise searches through Eastern religions and New Age philosophies to find answers, even though she is unable to articulate what the questions might be, and Rosa suffers the angst of being a motherless teenager. This represents the wave of political vacillation hanging over the 1990s. Jo's radical activism at Greenham Common is no longer seen as relevant, with Louise thinking her 'Reclaim the Night' banner would 'probably fetch something on the memorabilia market' (p. 104). Tony might say it is 'An amazing time to be living in. Huge empires are breaking up. It's like the end of the ice age,' (p. 104) but he, like all the other characters in the play, can only cope through self-invested avoidance tactics. As Sarah Hemming's review asserted, Jo's 'disappearance takes on an allegorical dimension. You realise that the play is in part taking stock of the loss of direction and certainty in the Left, and that, through the character of Jo, de Angelis is assessing what society offers to a 15-year-old'.<sup>11</sup> Rosa and Dogboy, the unemployed tramp who hangs about the beach, are seen as disenfranchised and their lack of ability to articulate their needs is shown through the way in which the homeless boy is forced to assume the role of a dog in order to be heard by society. Equally, though, de Angelis's work suggests it is those of the Left who have also been left without a say in present day society. Like the later *The Positive Hour*, there is a concern with female power and an examination of 'the climate of increasing political and personal desperation that afflicted liberals, leftists and feminists from the 1980s onwards, witnessing the erosion of values of community and compassion for which they had so long struggled.'<sup>12</sup>

*Playhouse Creatures* (1993)

*Playhouse Creatures* exists in at least three different versions. It was originally written for an all-female cast on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1993, directed by Sue Parrish at the Haymarket, with extra roles (including two male characters), added for Lynne Parker's revival at the Old Vic Theatre in 1997. It returns to a theme already explored in *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill*, namely the interplay between female sexuality and male predatory behaviour. This voyeuristic male gaze was an accepted part of the English theatre when professional actresses first appeared in 1660. At the beginning of the play, Doll Common, the Chorus-like figure, comments on how 'Once this was a playhouse, and before that, a bear pit', where animals are baited and forced to fight to the death. Doll can still hear 'their cries very faint and in the wind' (p. 159), and likewise, actresses of the Restoration period return to the old theatre to reminisce about their struggles to be taken seriously alongside their male counterparts. The indignities of their daily lives are catalogued, a constant struggle of misogyny, physical and sexual abuse, and poverty. Having upset the Earl of Oxford, Rebecca Marshall is set upon by his men, who 'rubbed shit into my hair. To teach me my manners' (p. 189). When Mrs Farley becomes pregnant and is forced to give up the stage, she has to prostitute herself, learning 'The art of performance... You've got to act like you like it. Love it even' (p. 218). For de Angelis, Mark Fisher says, 'such women were like Wild West pioneers, surviving on a dangerous frontier entirely through their own resourcefulness.'<sup>13</sup> Beyond this, though, there is an understanding of the delights the theatre can bring to performer and audience alike. Nell Gwyn feels loved by the crowds who watch her, and Mrs Barry describes how 'The world outside is grey and boring. But here, everything is different. It's magic. Magic' (p. 199).

Into this material, de Angelis weaves myths and fables about women. Jane de Gay argues that there has been a trend in women's drama to deconstruct

the original stories in some way, drawing attention to the constructed nature of narrative, the fabricated nature of performance, to deny that such narratives have any relationship to reality.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, when actresses appear in de Angelis's play dressed as Amazons and baring their breasts, this is designed to heighten 'the private and public aspects of

women's status as objects of possession and exchange:' these mythical creatures replicate in reality strong, adventurous women who enter and succeed in patriarchal spaces, even while being denied an equal status.<sup>15</sup> Mention is also made of women's perceived closeness to black magic, an area brought into a number of de Angelis's plays. Mrs Marshall sticks pins into a wax figure of her abusive lover, and with the rest dance around invoking the three witches' spells from *Macbeth*, a recurring motif in the play. Thomas Betterton, actor manager of the Duke's Company, never appears, but nevertheless rules over them. His wife Mary Betterton feels akin to Lady Macbeth, and tells Doll, 'I know why she went mad...It was the waiting, the waiting' (p. 227). Once educated by the other more cynical and worldly women, she begins to criticise Betterton's decisions and make demands of her own; indeed, in reality Mrs Betterton would take over her husband's job as theatre manager after his death. Although, as Ian Shuttleworth notes, 'her overall concern is with a number of women trying to do full justice to their individual potentials in a profession which requires them merely to be objects (whether to the audience in general or to particular spectators in private), de Angelis's principal tone is comic; camaraderies and rivalries alike are portrayed sardonically'.<sup>16</sup> Her lightness of touch avoids moralistic sermonizing.

#### *A Laughing Matter* (2002)

Careful leavening of weighty manners through humour is also evident in *A Laughing Matter*, which appeared at the Royal National Theatre, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2003. This was another piece for Stafford-Clark's Out-of-Joint company, a witty dissection of debates about 'low' vs. 'sentimental' comedy, and stylised vs. naturalistic acting, put in motion by Goldsmith and Garrick. While some critics were dismayed by the farcical scenes within the play, this was an accurate portrayal of theatre of the time, where the new middle classes audiences had to be catered for by dividing up a straight drama with entr'actes and afterpiece entertainments, usually the less intellectually challenging songs, dances, and pantomime. Garrick's legacy is generally seen as raising the standards of the theatre, but this is gently mocked through his rejection of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* in place of a vicar's third-rate play, so as to please his benefactor: Garrick tells the dramatist, 'I have a responsibility to my theatre...I can't just put a play on because a man is poor' (p. 27). In this way, the play

has at its heart eternal concerns about literary ambition and patronage of the arts, and the dichotomy between experimentation and commercialism, where the nurturing of future classics are rejected in place of an undemanding present. As Benedict Nightingale wrote in *The Times*, ‘Comedy needn’t be soft and comforting. It can be mischievous and subversive. You see the bind in which Jason Watkins’s spirited yet sly Garrick finds himself, trapped as he is by economic, social and moral pressures. It’s a bind his descendants know even today.’<sup>17</sup>

Max Stafford-Clark’s decision to run Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* alongside *A Laughing Matter* cleverly mimics, and upholds, de Angelis’s central story line - whether or not the play should be staged, and is itself an interesting comment on Out-of-Joint’s own commitment to new writing. Rachel Halliburton enjoyed ‘Julian McGowan’s opulently cluttered set’, which allowed ‘a handful of the audience to sit in boxes built onto the stage, so that the sense of the theatre within a theatre casts its spell over scenes.’<sup>18</sup> This cleverly added to the production’s authenticity, while also highlighting the whole project’s meta-theatricality. Double casting helped to delineate interesting comparisons and contrasts between the characters. Michael Coveney noted that ‘Owen Sharpe plays Goldsmith...as a tolerated booby in the literary club of Burke and Johnson, then the energetic madcap Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops*.... It is a superb double of comic infiltration in plays that question the nature of performance.’<sup>19</sup> Similar comments can also be made about Ian Radford cast in the roles of the Old Tory Samuel Johnson and the old-fashioned Mr Hardcastle, and Jane Wood as the patroness Lady Kingston and upwardly mobile Mrs Hardcastle. The concerns of *She Stoops to Conquer* – anxiety about social change, class displacement, sexual behaviour - all find their way into de Angelis’s affectionate pastiche, and for Coveney ‘The overall effect is of a wide-ranging survey of English class and manners in the late 18th century, filtered through a sieve of contemporary high spirits and bawdiness’.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Amongst Friends* (2007)

*Amongst Friends*, directed by Anthony Clark at Hampstead Theatre, 21 May 2009, is a dark morality tale, dealing with the fallout from New Labour and the Iraqi War. Labour MP Richard and tabloid journalist Lara live in an upmarket gated community in London, variously described as a ‘compound’, a ‘Cunt’ (p. 8), and ‘a Complex.



Once a psychological defence mechanism now a network of retail outlets and dwellings' (p. 9). Dominic Maxwell commented on the 'social schism that this armour-plated luxury represents,' which in turn has been spawned by panic in the middle class bourgeoisie over perceived social, religious, and racial difference: the title points out the insidious paranoia.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, therefore, into this sanctum these figures of the Establishment invite their previous neighbours, Joe and Caitlin, whose grandfather once worked in the building when it used to be a factory, contracting 'fuzzy lung...their term for respiratory sclerosis' (pp. 16-17). A malfunctioning entry phone also brings in Shelley from 'the other side of the roundabout', or as Lara calls it 'the sink estate' (p. 24). Claiming her son has died fighting in Basra, she berates Lara for her newspaper column supporting the war, and Richard for supplying inadequate military equipment.

During the play's inception, de Angelis recognized similarities with J B Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1946), which itself was written between 1944-45 to promote the ideology of the Labour Party on the eve of a General Election.<sup>22</sup> This was picked up on by Michael Coveney, who saw it as a 'J B Priestley set-up with satirical remarks about lifestyle' that strived for topical effect: 'there's even a lumpy reference to MPs' expenses that must have been pitched in last week', he waspishly adds.<sup>23</sup> Each character begins to be implicated in the death of the son, whose name changes from Leigh (English) to Mukerjee (Asian) to Donal (Irish), and who may or may not exist. The ambiguity is important, as he comes to stand for all those who have no place in society, who belongs to no one and everyone at the same time. The social and political satire prods at the impact of years of Thatcherite policies on the rise of New Labour, with Joe's bitter repetition of the 1997 mantra, 'Things can only get better,' (p. 10) a hollow echo even before his suicide. The suggestion is that society has moved from one concerned with community and neighbourliness to one fuelled by ignorance, fear, and hatred.

The original production placed the upwardly mobile Lara and Richard's flat against a dominant cityscape, with a blue lift rising and descending at the side. In this competitive, dog-eat-dog world, Lara feels smug in her view that envy is 'The Brits' disease', (p. 17) not seeing herself as part of the problem. As they look out from their self-sealed world – and it is significant that Lara suffers from agoraphobia - it is inevitable that it will be invaded by those they seek to leave behind in their scramble up the social ladder. The incursion of an outer, politically-motivated world on an

inner, complacently private one, is a standard of theatre. It was used to stunning effect in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, but the two plays could not be further apart in terms of technique, hinted at in Lyn Gardner's review, which thought the production opted 'for kitchen-chic realism rather than something more surreal and edgy.'<sup>24</sup> It is instructive that few women dramatists have presented political subjects beyond the domestic arena, or in an experimental way: works like *Blasted*, Churchill's *Far Away*, and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo* remain exceptions rather than the rule.

## Summary

Claire Macdonald provides a useful commentary on April de Angelis:

Her work is interestingly positioned between a newer wave of 1990s playwrights – such as the late Sarah Kane and Phyllis Nagy - who may have benefited from the widening of conventional opportunities...and the earlier generation of writer-makers from Bryony Lavery to Deborah Levy whose work was forged through the process of hands-on theatre making within a radical theatre generation (or two).<sup>25</sup>

Certainly her career has followed the rapid shift in visibility of women dramatists during the latter half of the twentieth century and into the next millennium. From 1979, when there were arguably only two well-known figures, Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill, there are now dozens of identifiable women contributing to British theatre. As one of these, de Angelis has made a significant contribution in signalling some of the most important concerns of women's drama: the necessity for giving a voice to the marginalized and disaffected through a reassessment of history, the effects of patriarchy on the disempowerment of women, and a belief in the strength of female creativity. Cheryl Robson notes that 'Since women's perspectives on life differed from the norm, they were inevitably considered to be an attack on the established order,' and de Angelis has shown herself to be consistently aware of this, embracing her position 'outside the margins' of conventional theatre,' as well as putting women's prescribed lives under scrutiny.<sup>26</sup>

However, it is important to note that she cannot and must not be defined solely in terms of gender, and indeed she has become increasingly involved in wider political

issues; for example, the failure of capitalism, and of globalization. De Angelis's work has also followed some of the most stylistically interesting changes in dramatic form and technique, including free-flowing and episodic scene shifts, non-realistic language and situations, and the use of strong visual and aural imagery.

Unlike many female dramatists of recent years, April de Angelis has never been shy of labelling herself a feminist; indeed, the strength of her work has mainly sprung from her political stance, and the sense of identity she gained from belonging to a larger collective group. Apart from herself, the list of female dramatists spawned out of this time is impressive: Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Elaine Feinstein, Pam Gems, Charlotte Keatley, Bryony Lavery, Deborah Levy, Claire McIntyre, Winsome Pinnock, Timberlake Wertenbaker, among many others. As de Angelis so rightly states, 'It now seems impossible to imagine a theatre landscape without these people. They changed the way women wrote and the things they felt they could write about.'<sup>27</sup> Like many of her female contemporaries, de Angelis brought to notice women who had been, in Sheila Rowbotham's words, 'hidden from history,' finding creative expression in revivifying these disordered and disorderly lives. Fanny Hill in the eponymous play, for example, directs a reconstruction of her own life, demanding a reassessment of the 'autobiographical' novel John Cleland has forced her to write.

As this suggests, narrating female experience also required a different theatrical form and technique. De Angelis has spoken about, not just the defining influence of Caryl Churchill on her work, but of how they both arrived at the same place almost simultaneously. Thus, *Ironmistress* was written before de Angelis saw *Top Girls*, but in retrospect she could immediately see the similarities, with their overlaying of myth and reality, and chronologically displaced time sequences. If the traditional three act structure represented male sexuality - 'it all builds up to one big bang and it's over' - women's plays could respond to their own sexuality, 'with lots of peaky bits'.<sup>28</sup> This has, inevitably, resulted in critics describing her work as 'episodic'. So, whilst *Playhouse Creatures* generally garnered good reviews when it first appeared, one (male) *Guardian* theatre critic seemed unimpressed by Alison Peebles' revival at the Dundee Rep in 2007: '*Playhouse Creatures* is less a play than a collage of scenes...Into this, she weaves the women's backstage stories, which come momentarily to life but lack sustaining dramatic force.'<sup>29</sup> Similar remarks have been made of de Angelis's work, and other female dramatists, but this was a deliberate technique of women's drama: to stitch together stories from myth, history and fiction,

past and present, to present a patchwork of different women's lives, and a new way of speaking. Jane de Gay and Lizbeth Goodman theorize this response as taking

its cue from Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches to language acquisition, in which entry into the symbol order of written language is figured as a male privilege: such language represents 'woman' as the desired other and thus fails to embody her. Language becomes a tool that objectifies women and cannot convey their perspectives or experiences. The search for a 'woman's language' may thus be seen as an attempt to circumvent this perceived problem.<sup>30</sup>

As a feminist writer, then, April de Angelis has done much to put women centre stage, a place that historically has been difficult for them. This can be seen most literally by the large number of female roles she has created, which provides a counterbalance to the male-dominated theatre of this country, but her use of symbolic language and minimal staging also draws attention to female oppression and the loss of their history. The final image of *Playhouse Creatures* is chilling in its positioning of the female struggle for freedom. Doll recollects how her father, as master of the bear pit, had a bear's claws and teeth ripped out when she tried to turn against her fate, and Doll had the warm blood smeared on her face so she would not forget this lesson; all the while, Mrs Barry continues to count out the theatre owner's takings from the performances by women in the same space. A revival at the Leeds Playhouse in 2003 set the action on a revolve, and the distorted rectangular proscenium and use of see-through mirror between front and backstage areas highlighted the links between past and present, performance and voyeurism, financial remuneration and exploitation. It is unclear for the characters at the end whether women have swapped their role as orange-sellers – a seventeenth-century euphemism for prostitutes – for acting, only to find that they are one and the same. Unlike her contemporary Sarah Daniels, de Angelis moves beyond a negotiation of male exploitation to argue that 'feminist writing of the eighties has re-invented a place for women's sexuality on stage', which puts women in control, rather than turning them into victims.<sup>31</sup>

By the 1990s, though, de Angelis, along with other female dramatists, began to see the emphasis upon feminist issues such as women's oppression as repetitive and limiting, usurped by 'in-yer-face' drama. She confided, 'Truth be told, women's

theatre had become passé...it felt like writing against the grain of the times.'<sup>32</sup> The new generation of dramatists, including Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Jez Butterworth, and Judy Upton, were disenchanted by the old political certainties: as a generation they believed they had witnessed the failure of party politics, Communism and Capitalism, and therefore no longer had any sense of engagement with 'the utopian socialist visions of the 1970s and the satirical critiques of the 1980s.'<sup>33</sup> De Angelis's worry was that 'if you abandon the big idea do you then abandon the idea of humanism, which is progress is possible, change is possible, people are basically good'?'<sup>34</sup>

- This is tackled in de Angelis's work through her interrogation of the nexus between history, society and politics, one of the most notable features of her oeuvre being how many are set in the past, with a slippage between real and fictionalized selves: *Crux* in the thirteenth century, *Playhouse Creatures* in the seventeenth, *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill* and *A Laughing Matter* in the eighteenth, *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Emma* and *Ironmistress* in the nineteenth, *Soft Vengeance* in the more recent past, and so on. These time slips became of interest to British dramatists in the 1970s and 1980s, as in the politically motivated works of David Edgar (*Plenty*) and Caryl Churchill (*Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, et al), or the more inter-generational concerns of Charlotte Keatley (*My Mother Said I Never Should*) or Sharman Macdonald (*When I Was a Girl I Used to Scream and Shout*). There are also strong similarities with the work of Timberlake Wertenbaker (*The Grace of Mary Traverse*, *The Love of the Nightingale*) and Bryony Lavery (*Origin of the Species*, *Witchcraze*, *Ophelia*), all of whom were part of a major trend towards the deconstruction of history and myth.

In a simple way, April de Angelis interrogates the relationship between people's lives and how this relates to the wider social and political forces around them, demonstrating the ease with which the individual or group can be erased from memory and therefore from history. Fanny Hill says 'I seem to have forgot myself', having been turned into 'one big hole' (pp.179-80) by male sexual fantasies. When Marguarite in *Crux* is being burnt at the stake, all she felt was a 'terrible fear/Of pain, Of dark nothing forever' (p. 87). Villagers in *A Warwickshire Testimony* are concerned that the developers are 'making up a village and plonking it down on top of the old one. It'll be like a grave with the wrong headstone' (p. 10).

More complexly, as David Edgar has pointed out, de Angelis ‘continues not only to write history historically, but to treat the present in the same way.’<sup>35</sup> In 1998 she wanted to believe in history – ‘a truth that is the sum of us and what’s happened to us in our histories that will emerge and reveal who we are’. However, the impact of commercialism and globalization is leading instead to ‘an age of surface depthlessness’, a realization brought home to her by watching Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), with its lack of realistic characters and ‘elaborate and sophisticated game with the audience’s expectations of how scenes connect within narrative.’<sup>36</sup>

De Angelis herself displays the workings of history through her use of poetic narrative and form, which goes back to the earliest forms of drama, suggesting that the narration of people’s stories and the unfolding of the weight of historical events is part of humanity’s power to survive, and of theatre itself as a communal activity. This sense of communality also underpins de Angelis’s collaborative working methods, forged out her early political experiences. ‘How better to enter a new territory but together?’ she asks. ‘The Women’s Movement has accentuated the personal as political.’<sup>37</sup> While this term has often been abused, it is one that suits de Angelis’s agenda, as she strives to show how individuals and communities have been radically changed by wider political forces. Of course, de Angelis at first hand experienced how Thatcherism had a devastating effect on new theatre writing in general, and women’s drama in particular, noting that now ‘the emphasis lay on the marketable product...small casts, compact sets and efficiency – rather than on process, experiment, collaboration and collectivity.’<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, she has managed to fuse these seemingly oppositional viewpoints. Collaborations with, and commissions for some of the most important theatre companies of the last few decades, where economic restraints have been acute, have led to a sharpening of her creative responses: minimal staging allows a focus upon the visual image - Dorothy at the beginning of *A Warwickshire Territory* sitting on a bare stage with a gun in her lap - or on language - Magda and Minna’s recollection of their dreams in *Breathless*; and in both *Soft Vengeance* and *Ironmistress*, the inability to be given a larger cast led to her creating alter egos for her main characters as a way to engage with their inner life in an intensely dramatic way.<sup>39</sup>

April de Angelis's work was born of 1970s female agit prop, or what she terms 'the "upfront" feminist/revolutionary mode', and became part of 'the emergence of more poetic, experimental and visual theatre female/ritualistic forms.'<sup>40</sup> Her comments on female oppression and historical dislocation are illuminating, and she has on the whole worked to dismantle existing form, language and meaning. It is no coincidence that she celebrates 'The notion of play, central to deconstruction,' which 'challenges the fixed relationships between the sign/signifier and the signified of semiotics, asserting that any text is not a self-enclosed model, but the meaning is always deferred by the play of signification.'<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, throughout her work runs a fundamental belief in the power of imagination. Once she noted that 'really oppressive regimes like the one in Beijing have to be so oppressive if they are going to control people's thoughts. They have to be rigorous and violent because people don't want to be controlled in that way.'<sup>42</sup> April de Angelis has refused to have her imagination curtailed by political doctrine, passing fashions, or existing conventions. In this way she has proved herself to be one of British theatre's most serviceable and trenchant dramatists.

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- <sup>1</sup> Susan Croft, *She Also Wrote Plays*, p. 58.
- <sup>2</sup> Other plays for BBC Radio 4 include adaptations of *Black Narcissus* (BBC Radio 4, 1997) and *Emma* (BBC Radio 4, 2000), *Childless* (2006), *I Leap over the Wall* (2006), *Cashcows* (2009), and *Counting* (2009), the latter being an inquiry into the Iraqi war.
- <sup>3</sup> April de Angelis, 'Introduction', p. ix.
- <sup>4</sup> April de Angelis, 'Introduction', p. ix.
- <sup>5</sup> Geraldine Cousin, p. 65.
- <sup>6</sup> Geraldine Cousin, p. 60.
- <sup>7</sup> April de Angelis and Caryl Churchill have both noted their debt to Max Stafford-Clark's working methods. See, for example, Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, p. 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, p. 59.
- <sup>9</sup> Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, p. 59.
- <sup>10</sup> Rebecca D'Monté, p. 91.
- <sup>11</sup> Sarah Hemming, *The Independent*, 29 July 1992.
- <sup>12</sup> Susan Croft, *She Also Wrote Plays*, p. 59.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Jane de Gay, 'Seizing Speech and Playing with Fire', p. 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, p. 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, *The Financial Times*, 15 September 1997.
- <sup>17</sup> Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 18 December 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Rachel Halliburton, *Evening Standard*, 18 December 2002.
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- <sup>20</sup> Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 18 December 2002.
- <sup>21</sup> Dominic Maxwell, *The Times*, 28 May 2009.
- <sup>22</sup> April de Angelis interview with Aleks Sierz, [http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen\\_now/player/?audioID=689](http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen_now/player/?audioID=689).
- <sup>23</sup> Michael Coveney, *The Independent*, 3 June 2009.
- <sup>24</sup> Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2009.
- <sup>25</sup> Claire Macdonald, p. 237.
- <sup>26</sup> Cheryl Robson, p. 6.
- <sup>27</sup> April de Angelis, *Guardian*, 10 September 2005.
- <sup>28</sup> April de Angelis, 'Women and Theatre', <http://www.robinkelly.btinternet.co.uk/angelis.htm>
- <sup>29</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> Jane de Gay and Lizbeth Goodman, 'Introduction,' p. 5.
- <sup>31</sup> April de Angelis, 'Women and Theatre,' <http://www.robinkelly.btinternet.co.uk/angelis.htm>
- <sup>32</sup> April de Angelis, *Guardian*, 10 September 2005.
- <sup>33</sup> Rebecca D'Monté, p. 110.
- <sup>34</sup> April de Angelis, 'Women and Theatre', <http://www.robinkelly.btinternet.co.uk/angelis.htm>
- <sup>35</sup> David Edgar (ed), p. 18.
- <sup>36</sup> David Edgar (ed), p. 77, p. 78. De Angelis goes on to provide a useful metaphor for the effacement of individuals by larger political forces when she describes 'thinking

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about the Ogoni people and about when they struggled with Shell, the multinational company that has its tentacles everywhere, all that happened was the Ogoni leaders were murdered and the logo of Shell continued to shine out brightly over our world – and nothing happened’, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> April de Angelis, and Susan Croft, p. 139.

<sup>38</sup> April de Angelis, and Susan Croft, p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> There is also interesting use of cast doubling in *Wuthering Heights* to show inter-generational connections through the characters of Cathy/Young Cathy and Hindley/Hareton.

<sup>40</sup> April de Angelis, and Susan Croft, p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> April de Angelis, and Susan Croft, p. 141.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, p. 56.