

**THE WILMA THEATER**

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# open stages

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WILMA THEATER

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## **Age of Arousal December 5, 2007 - January 6, 2008**

### **Introduction**

#### **“A Dream of Victorian England”**

Welcome to the U.S. premiere of Linda Griffiths' *Age of Arousal*. The following pages will introduce you to Linda Griffiths and to George Gissing, as well as touch on some of the many issues and themes raised by the play, or by Gissing's novel that “wildly inspired” it. There are so many, it would take all the space we have simply to catalog them, which would have the negative effect of ignoring the play's wonderful theatricality and sense of play, which is also the play's point.

While *Age of Arousal* is set in 1885, it is not a “historical play” in any conventional sense, as Linda Griffiths

explains in her interview. She describes it as a “dream of Victorian England,” as a “fantasia:” the ideas, motives and actions of the characters are informed by ideas, motives and actions of real men and women in the years between roughly 1870 and 1914, but do not have a chronological “reality” to them. Instead, like our memories of a dream, they are the bits and pieces that felt most important in Linda Griffiths' creative process, crafted within a shape that gives them some meaning to her and to us in our present-day lives. The characters and ideas are, if you will, ghosts of our ancestors, although very generous and hopeful ghosts – hopeful, I feel, in the sense that they believe we may be able to live fuller, more human lives than their time allowed them.

Blanka Zizka and the designers drew

strongly upon the notion of historical fantasia in their work. Blanka has said that on nearly “every page I saw the characters becoming aroused – intellectually, sensually, sexually, artistically, and politically.” Rather than attempting to reproduce Victorian London onstage, they imagined “a space in which all this stimulation and excitement could live, a space that could burst open, but that would still suggest a sense of claustrophobia and secret desires, in which characters change costume because they've changed psychologically, in which the sound echoes Linda's language and moves between the end of the nineteenth century and the present to create a bridge between the Victorians and us.”

– Walter Bilderback

### **“You have to leap out of reality in presenting history:”**

#### **An interview with Linda Griffiths**

##### ***How did Age of Arousal come about?***

I found a battered paperback in a secondhand bookstore and bought it for a dollar. I'd never heard of George Gissing, I turned the book over and the synopsis said, “Five Victorian spinsters...” I was sold. I put it away, but I knew I'd write something about it some day. What drew me was five

female characters, but I was also drawn to the idea of time travel. I'm a bit of a Merchant/Ivory slut, I love lolling around and watching the period dramas on T.V. But I always feel guilty. People like me often feel guilty at the lack of edge in period re-enactment – the potentially saccharine devotion to form. Even though it's presented so beautifully we hate ourselves for loving it. I knew that I would have to challenge the form in some way, to find my own

kind of time-travel.

Gissing's novel is placed in the pre-suffragette world of Britain but I could see how it was possible to open the door to the militant suffragettes. I had always wanted to learn more about them but was too lazy to find out. Now, with the impetus of a project, I could dive into this history.

I knew I wasn't going to do a

conventional adaptation. I didn't know what it would be, but I knew I would have to be merciless with George Gissing, I would have to offend him and ignore him and make him squirm. I wanted to say what I wanted to say. I wanted to steal the basic situation and basic characters and take them in my own direction without caring about George. But of course I did.

At first I read the book assiduously, arduously, with lots of colored stickies at pages I needed to examine. Just the way you would if you were writing an adaptation. But I knew that there were things I wanted the characters to do that were different from what Gissing had them do. Still the first draft was fairly close to the book. Months later I looked at it and was totally bored. I was sick of subtext; the whole point of the Victorians was that there was so much underneath, but why should it be eternally underneath? Having characters leap out of what is expected and exorcise their inner feelings has been a part of my work since *Maggie & Pierre* (1980) and was central in *The Darling Family* (1991), where the subtext was in such contrast to the external text, that it is spoken. I took the idea farther and used it differently in *Age of Arousal*, and everything kicked into high gear. I dropped a character, changed characters, got rid of a whole thread of plot. The thing started galloping, I could barely keep up. I deliberately avoided the book, returning to it very rarely. But the basis was all there, and a few scenes are still fairly close to Gissing's.

There is now a subtitle, "Wildly Inspired by George Gissing's *The Odd Women*." Wild, not only because of the pace and style, but because of the degree of liberties I took. Inspired, because without Gissing's inspiration, there would be no play.

**Do you consider this a "historical play?"**

*Age of Arousal* doesn't take place in historical reality, it takes place in a fabulist construct – an idea, a dream of Victorian England. It is stuffed with historical facts and modern/Victorian issues, but the world created is unreal. Always there should be a tension between the genuine struggle of each character to evolve — and the dance of fantasy as the play unfolds. Who knows what day it is, how many months have passed? You can track through this detail in the script, and hopefully it all will add up, but it will never be key in how to approach the play. Everyone in this play is on the brink of tumultuous change. They're not dry historical figures, but sexual and lubricious, explosive and contradictory. As I was writing them, they beat down any idea of a buttoned-up age, they wept and fought, they made no sense, they made too much sense, they stretched my brain, and encouraged the most delicious time travel.

**"Everyone in this play is on the brink of tumultuous change."**

***Is it actually possible to write plays on historical subjects that have any power without using fabulist, surrealist, or magic realist techniques or lenses? Magic realism, for instance, was created by Latin American and Caribbean writers who were strongly influenced by the surrealists but argued that, in the Americas, fantastic elements created a more accurate depiction of reality than naturalism or realism. This seems to be true of Age of Arousal as well.***

All cultures invent their own magic realism. My work is more influenced by native North American culture, after my experience with native author and activist Maria Campbell. I've always



Linda Griffiths

believed, with whoever it was who said it, that reality is overrated. I especially believe this in the theatre. The element of fantasy is a part of everyone's reality, the part that lay in bed as a child, looking out a window and dreaming. But it has to be linked to a challenge of some kind or it goes too soft and Disneyish. I think this is why Latin countries have been able to develop writers who meld their magic with their politics.

In terms of history, we all know the "bio play" or TV "bio drama." It rarely actually brings us to the subject even though we learn a sequence of events. My first work as a playwright was a one-person show in 1980, *Maggie & Pierre*, in which I played the Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, his wife Maggie, and a journalist called Henry. There was a TV drama about Trudeau done recently, it was really good (I didn't play Pierre, can't figure out why). I couldn't help thinking that in theatre I could have Pierre on his knees praying, but in the bio reality, they had to keep to what happened. If he historically shed a tear, he could cry, if he didn't, then it would be a leap to present him crying. Yes, I think you have to leap out of reality in presenting history, but in doing that, you take a risk. You alter time.

**Can you tell us a little about your career? You're well-known in Canada, but have had relatively few U.S. productions.**

My background is with improvisational theatre as developed by Canadian theatre icon Paul Thompson. I originally did a lot of collective creations until my one person show, *Maggie & Pierre*. It was the kind of hit that doesn't happen often. It toured Canada for two years and played Off Broadway at the now defunct Phoenix Theatre. I then acted in film and television, playing the title role in John Sayles' *Liana* and acting opposite Raul Julia in the TV drama, *Overdrawn at the Memory Bank*. I also acted at the Public Theatre in Caryl Churchill's *Fen*.

At the same time, I was being pulled towards writing. I began to develop plays through a combination of conventional writing and improvisation. Sometimes I've acted in those plays, sometimes not. A seminal creative experience was working with native author and activist Maria Campbell (*Halfbreed*, *The Book of Jessica*). The riches of native North American culture

connected to my own search for spiritual and cultural roots and helped me to delve deeper into my writing. The most produced of all my work is a two-hander called *The Darling Family*, which has been produced all over the world, including three times in New York, but often by young companies so it tends to be under the radar. The plays tend to move between the small to the very large — one person shows and two-handers, to epics like *Age of Arousal* and *The Duchess: aka Wallis Simpson*. Some are written entirely conventionally, buttocks planted in front of the screen, others are developed on my feet, like the new one person show I am performing in Canada, *The Last Dog of War*. This is about a trip I took with my father to the last reunion of his RAF squadron.

Often my plays stem from something specific, either in my own life or in the public arena. There isn't really a category for my work — for a while I decided to call myself a 'fabulist' without really knowing what it meant. This was to address the area of fantasy or the unreal, but it doesn't include the

element of the subversive which is, I hope, always present.

**“My work attempts to dance between the personal, the political and the fantastic.”**

My work attempts to dance between the personal, the political and the fantastic. I believe that work about politics, illness, native/white relations, abortions, royalty, baseball, or sex all share a common thread. The process of creation changes with each project. The goal is to create theatre that is highly literate, physically imaginative, and emotionally connected — a theatre where an exploration of the surreal does not exclude a love of language. Add to this an awareness of the topical — of political or social issues explored without reverting to polemic.

## A Letter to George

Dear George,

It's not that I don't care, I do. But I have stolen your work. I know you had a hard life, that you married a prostitute, that you really tried to understand women, to break the class barrier, to be kind. But I have to say that there's a lot of what I would call misogyny in *The Odd Women*, even though the basic situation is so ahead of its time. Sometimes the things you have women say about women made me writhe. But it's also great. Even Shaw never put that many women together in the same work. George, I know you saw many dark things, and that your age was so filled with the contrast of light and dark. You reached and

yearned, George, I know that. And now this woman, me, has reached into what you did and done what she wanted. I used your character names because I didn't want to hide what I was doing. They ask me how the play is different from the book, and I want to say, "completely," but that's not true. I wanted it to be about the relationships between the women, and to do that I had to throw out a lot of your writing and some of your plotting. I added the element of sex, and I don't think that's irreverent, given your first marriage. You couldn't write about it, but I can. The militant suffrage movement hadn't happened, yet, but I believe if you'd known it was coming that you would have written things a little differently. What you did is a flawed brilliant thing, how bad is that? You found

love in the end, and I'm so glad. And people know your work and care about it, even now. I want to deny you and take all the credit for myself. I feel like it would have taken me the same number of years to make it up myself, but I didn't. I leaned on you, but I'm not sorry.

*Love, Linda.*

## George Gissing

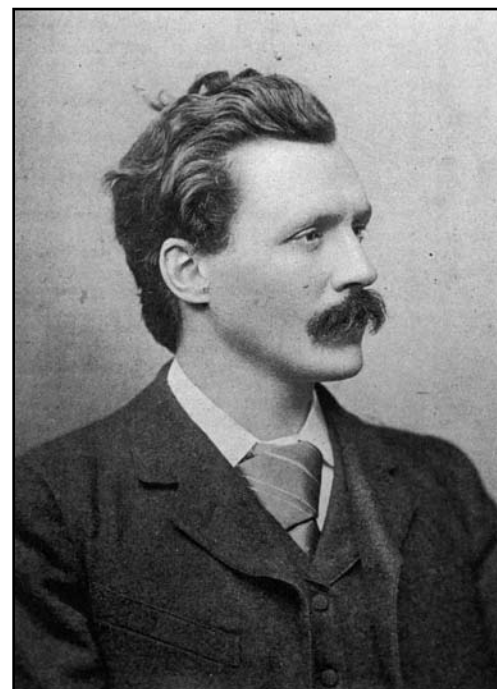
According to Patricia Ingham, editor of a modern edition of the novel, George Gissing's *The Odd Women* "engages with all the major social and sexual issues that were fiercely debated as the nineteenth century approached its close." George Orwell thought it "one of the best novels in English." Another editor, Arlene Young, calls it "arguably the most important novel published in Britain in the 1890s." Gissing himself epitomized the sort of contradictions the period gave rise to. In the words of biographer David Grylls, he was "a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation."

As Ingham writes, "Gissing's life has all the elements of a melodrama." Born into a lower-middle-class family in 1857, Gissing was admitted to Owens College (now the University of Manchester) on a scholarship. He won numerous local and national academic prizes, and seemed on his way to a secure and respected professorship. However, the young man fell in love with a prostitute, Nell Harrison, whom he tried to save from "the life." For Gissing, buying a sewing

**"a woman-worshipping misogynist with an interest in female emancipation."**

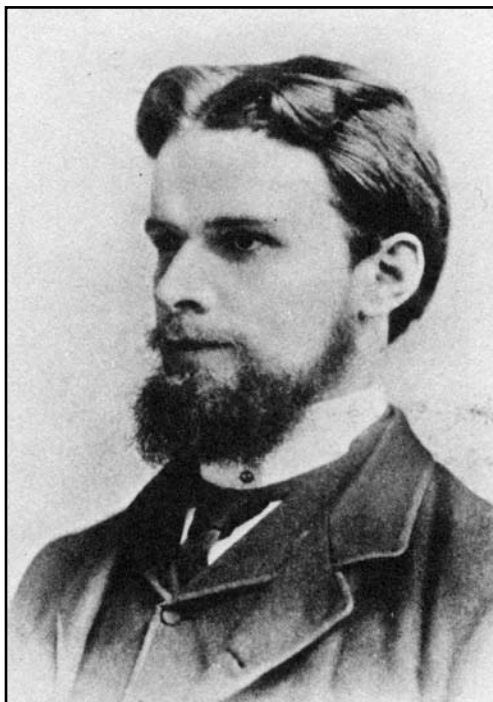
machine was essential to this plan and, lacking money, he stole the money from the college. His crime was revealed by a private detective, and Gissing was stripped of his awards and scholarship and expelled from college. After a year's self-exile in the U. S., he returned to England and began writing novels. He also married Nell Harrison. The marriage was unsuccessful, however, and they separated. After Harrison died of alcoholism, Gissing got married, again to a working-class woman, Edith Underwood, with whom he had two sons. This marriage again foundered: Underwood was not his intellectual equal and also suffered from emotional problems, ultimately being committed to a mental institution. Gissing eventually settled into a relationship with a young French woman whom he met when she asked to translate one of his novels.

Throughout these tumultuous times, Gissing continued to write, prolifically but with little financial success. Throughout his life, he saw himself as an outsider. As Elaine Showalter writes, Gissing "identified with 'oddness,' difference, and alienation as social characteristics." In 23 years, he wrote more than 20 novels, as well as a critical study of Charles Dickens, short stories, essays, and three volumes of letters. His best known novels are *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*, both of which remain standards on college syllabi.

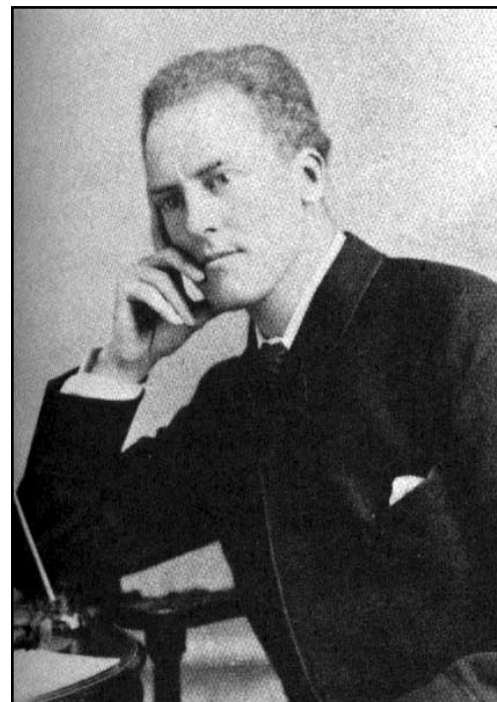


George Gissing

**"Gissing's life has all the elements of a melodrama."**



Havelock Ellis "the father of sexology"



Karl Pearson, founder of the Men and Women's Club



Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx and co-author of *The Woman Question*

## Odd Women/New Women

Gissing wrote that his subjects were “the women who are odd in the sense that they do not make a match, as we say ‘an odd glove.’” By the 1890s, there were between one-half million and a million more women than men in England; women who had to find a way to support themselves in the world. The traditional default jobs for middle-class women who couldn’t “make” a marriage, as tutors or governesses, were becoming restricted due to higher professional standards.

Many of these women became “odd” in another, more self-conscious meaning – they did not fit the reigning Victorian dichotomy of classifying woman either as prostitute or devoted wife and mother, a sexual vampire or “the angel in the house,” in either case lacking the physical and intellectual strength to take part in politics or the professional world. (The plays of Henrik Ibsen provided an intellectual touchstone for those brave souls who actively tried to destroy this “doll’s house” mentality.) In addition, the Reform Acts of the 19th century continued to expand the suffrage for men, leading middle-class female

reformers such as Josephine Butler or Millicent Garrett Fawcett to demand the vote for women as well. The supporters for women’s rights – whether political, sexual, or economic – commonly became known as suffragists, feminists, or New Women. In the United Kingdom, the demand for women’s suffrage would grow increasingly militant before it was met in 1928 — following, among other nations, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and Burma. As most of us know, prejudice about women’s intellectual and creative abilities persisted even longer.

These issues gave rise to what was frequently called the Woman Question (always capitalized). Feminists and anti-feminists described a “sex war” fought between men and women, with civilization at stake. As usual with

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cultural issues, journalism and the arts helped define the battle lines. Against anti-feminist attacks (by both men and women), were New Woman essays, novels and plays (again written both by men and women). These writers included George Bernard Shaw, Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, Thomas Hardy, and Gissing. After Mona Caird published her essay “Marriage,” the *Daily Telegraph* received more than 27,000 letters in response over the next few months. One of the striking features of *The Odd Women* is that, in contrast to most New Woman literature, it does not take place within rarified, almost fairy tale settings among the aristocracy and upper classes but in a grittily realistic London in which Gissing’s multiple



Olive Schreiner, author of *The Story of an African Farm* and *Woman and Labour*

heroines – Rhoda Nunn, Mary Barfoot, the three Madden sisters — have to worry about the necessity to support themselves financially, whether through a “good marriage” or through finding jobs and creating jobs for women.

While it is easy to view all this as “history,” *Age of Arousal* invigorates some of the most essential of these questions and prompts us to ask how much different things are today for the odd women (and men) among us.



Donna Quixote, anti-New Woman cartoon from *Punch*