



Split Britches

by B.J. Wray

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For the past two decades, the Split Britches theater company has led the way in innovative lesbian performance.

Originally, Split Britches was composed of Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin. In 1980, Weaver began to develop a performance piece based upon her family history. Along with Shaw, Weaver constructed the characters of her two aunts and one great-aunt who had lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. They titled the piece *Split Britches*, based upon the pants women wore in the fields, which allowed them to urinate without stopping work.

Weaver and Shaw performed the piece at the first WOW (Women's One World) Festival in New York; and in 1981, after a successful run of the show, Deb Margolin joined Split Britches as a script writer and performer.

In their tours of North America, Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, Split Britches quickly established a powerful presence in lesbian theater and performance.

Critic and theorist Sue Ellen Case aptly sums up the importance of the trio in the development of contemporary lesbian performance: "the troupe created a unique 'postmodern' style that served to embed feminist and lesbian issues of the times, economic debates, national agendas, personal relationships, and sex-radical role playing in spectacular and humorous deconstructions of canonical texts, vaudeville shtick, cabaret forms, lip-synching satire, lyrical love scenes, and dark, frightening explorations of class and gender violence."

Most major anthologies on lesbian/feminist/women's theaters include at least one article on Split Britches, and their performances are followed avidly by lesbian and feminist academics writing on lesbian theater, butch-femme role playing, and representations of lesbian desire.

Together, Shaw, Weaver, and Margolin composed and performed *Split Britches* (1981), *Beauty and the Beast* (1982), *Upwardly Mobile Home* (1984), *Little Women* (1988), and *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992).

As Split Britches, Shaw and Weaver collaborated with Isabel Miller in adapting her novel *Patience and Sarah* to the stage (1987), with Holly Hughes in the creation of *Dress Suits To Hire* (1987), with the troupe Blooplips in *Belle Reprieve* (1991), and with James Neale-Kennerley in *Lust and Comfort* (1995).

As a duo, Shaw and Weaver performed *Anniversary Waltz* (1989) on their tenth anniversary, and Shaw retained the name Split Britches for her solo piece *You're Just Like My Father* (1994).

Weaver's solo performance *Faith and Dancing* opened in 1997 and toured the United States, Great Britain, and New Zealand.

Shaw and Weaver's most recent works include *It's a Small House and We've Lived in It Always*, in

collaboration with the Clod Ensemble in London; and *Salad of the Bad Cafe*, in collaboration with Okinawan performance artist Stacy Makishi.

Split Britches has been the recipient of numerous honors. It was awarded the Villager award for best ensemble in 1985. Shaw received Obies in 1988 for her role in *Dress Suits To Hire* and in 1999 for her solo performance *Menopausal Gentleman*. The collaborative ensemble of Split Britches and Bloodlips earned the ensemble Obie for *Belle Reprieve* in 1991.

The national organization of Women in Theater has repeatedly showcased the work of Split Britches and organized panel discussions around their innovations.

Split Britches was instrumental in the founding of the WOW Café, a collectively operated performance space in New York City that features women's community theater. Since its opening in 1982, the WOW café has been home to many prominent lesbian and feminist performance artists.

The persona of Carmelita Tropicana, the Latina lesbian comic, was created in the Café. Holly Hughes first performed there, writing comic fragments that would later become her performance scripts. So, too, Sarah Schulman staged her early plays in the WOW Café.

The Café has become one of the best-known spaces for women's performance in New York City.

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About the Author

B.J. Wray lectures in the Department of English at the University of California, Davis. She is revising her dissertation on nationalism and sexuality in English-Canada lesbian cultural texts into a book-length study of the performance of sexual citizenship in the United States and Canada. She has published on lesbian performance art and queer choreography.

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