

Wish I Had More Theater Like This

Nina Solomita

When poet and actor Elisabeth Gray was approached by her mentor at Oxford University in October 2006 to write a dramatic piece about the poet Sylvia Plath, Gray's first reaction was: "Me, write about Plath. I don't even like her poetry!" As she tells this story, Gray appropriates a British accent imitating her mentor, Dr. Sally Bayley. "Oh, but Elisabeth dahling, you have so much in common with her; she was an American living in England, and she was highly neurotic and very talented. Perhaps you could put something together from the journals." Bayley hoped to present the piece the following October at the 75th Sylvia Plath Symposium at Oxford for a large gathering of Plath scholars.

As it turns out, the *something* that Gray put together over the period of a year, *Wish I Had a Sylvia Plath (WIHASP)*, is a 60-minute startlingly original, comedic and serious theatrical piece that is both about and not about Sylvia Plath. In August 2007, it won the Edinburgh Festival's Fringe First Award for Innovative and Outstanding New Writing, garnering critical acclaim for writer and actor (Gray had also been nominated by Stage Awards for best performance in a solo show) before arriving at its Oxford Symposium destination. Once there, Gray performed the piece for some of the most respected Plath scholars in the world. Their response was not only positive, but, in the opinion of Plath and American Studies scholar, Dr. Barbara Mossberg, Gray made a profound, illuminating and original contribution to Plath scholarship that must be incorporated into future study on the subject of her life and poetry. This is especially intriguing because, although shaped by all of Plath's writing and biographies of her and her husband, poet Ted Hughes, there is not one quoted word. All the writing is original.

In its present form, *WIHASP* includes one live and several filmed actors, a talking oven, a husband-poet Ned Pews, and a skewed 1950s-style TV cooking show. Esther Greenwood, the main character, originally appeared as the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Plath's novel fictionalizing her own nervous breakdown and nearly-successful suicide attempt during her college years. The play opens with Esther entering her kitchen wearing a bright red dress. She kneels and delicately places her head and upper torso into



the oven. The same image appears in a black and white video projected upstage. A bell dings. Esther removes herself from the oven, and for the next hour enacts a fragmented hallucinatory version of the major internal and external events of her life induced by the final stages of death by hypoxia—a lack of oxygen to the brain.

My first exposure to *WIHASP* was in May 2007, in Carmel, California, where Gray and her videographer and director at the time, John Farmanesh-Bocca, showcased the play with the intention of refining it based on audience response and their own experiences with the production.¹ I was intrigued by the piece, and shortly after that performance, I interviewed Gray. We have kept in touch over the past few years about the progress and successes of *WIHASP*. It was also in Carmel that Gray met Mossberg, who has written and lectured extensively about Plath's life and poetry. After seeing *WIHASP* early in its Carmel run, Mossberg, struck by the originality in perspective, became an ardent supporter of Gray and her work, taking on the role of dramaturge. Gray asked her to introduce *WIHASP* in Carmel and to present after-show talks on the poet, a role she also performed at the Oxford presentations.

WIHASP is Gray's first play (written at the tender age of 22), and its completion and subsequent success have given her the confidence to continue writing for the theater. (She is currently at work on a play about Emily Dickinson traveling in a time machine to become Bob Dylan.) Although she has acted professionally in many roles, she finds herself less inclined to do traditional theater. "What I'm learning about myself," she says, "is that I really want to be bringing people something that's meaty and vital, something they haven't seen before."

Once Gray was persuaded to at least look at Plath's journals, she discovered, to her surprise, that her mentor had been right. "I started going through the material, and here was this wonderful, sane person that I *did* relate to—I knew the woman in the journals." Gray has kept journals from the time she was fourteen and, indeed, it was the poet's teenage entries that "got me hooked." Thus inspired, Gray reread *The Bell Jar*,

¹ John Farmanesh-Bocca is the Artistic Director of Shakespeare Santa Monica and the Big Sur Theatre Lab, an international experimental theatre retreat set in Big Sur, California, as well as the founder and director of Not Man Apart—Physical Theatre Ensemble.



"and, having found it incredibly indulgent the first time around, this time I thought it was fantastic, very funny."

After considering constructing a piece from actual journal entries, Gray decided that: "I wanted to do something of my own, something I could have creative input on as opposed to just regurgitating this woman's work." Back in her native North Carolina, she stayed in a cabin in the woods for two months. "I immersed myself in it all—the journals, the collected letters to her mother and others, her poetry and biographies, and also Ted Hughes' collection of poems written about her, *Birthday Letters*." At the time, she was also reading August Strindberg's work and was particularly influenced by *A Dream Play*, in which he broke all the rules of writing for the theater at the time. *A Dream Play*, filled with subjective imagery, follows the illogical, non-linear movement of a dream and does not tie up neatly in the end. Gray says, "This [*WIHASP*] is the closest thing to a dream play because it's a dream *death* play."

Gray had decided on the overall concept for the piece early on: to explore what the protagonist experiences in the last few seconds of conscious life. "My uncle recently passed away walking from his bedroom to his bathroom in the middle of the night. There was no sign of struggle, but when he collapsed there was probably a minute there when he was awake and cognitive. My mother almost died once, and that was kind of a mythological story—the *time mom nearly died*—and the way everything flashed through her brain in those last seconds."

Gray had another good reason for beginning her play at the end of the character's life. She knew that it was important to acknowledge Plath's suicide at the age of 30—a fact for which she is perhaps better known than for her poetry. Plath has been harshly judged by some for her choice. That her two small children were in the apartment at the time adds to their bile. (They did survive, thanks to Plath's protective measures of opening windows and blocking the cracks around their door with wet towels—the filmed enactment of which is seen late in the play.) Gray states: "There's no way of denying that this happened. The only way to get around it is to throw it out there in the first five seconds, so it's no longer relevant, so that people aren't waiting for her to commit suicide. If you pretend it's not there, they'll be waiting the whole time for it to happen and you're denying her the theatricality of her life which was this great staging."



In keeping with the idea of staging one's life and death, Gray chose to portray the last minutes not of Plath's life but Esther Greenwood's. Gray says: "I wanted to do Esther Greenwood because as Plath said herself, the novel [*The Bell Jar*] was an amplification of her own life. She's [Plath] saying, this is my life in Technicolor! So what she did was take her autobiography and make it something funnier and better drawn than her real life. And I wanted to be able to do that. I wanted the creative liberty to say, this is Esther, so people who do know Plath know that Esther Greenwood is the amplified version."

Gray follows Plath's example of deconstructing her own story by using the character of Esther Greenwood. Gray has chosen to portray not only the events in Plath's life that compel her attention, but also her state of mind—mania. She believes that the roller coaster of emotions and sensations inherent in a bipolar personality, as conveyed by Esther (and as lived by Plath), feeds an artist's creativity, and that there's a danger of relinquishing that creativity when the artist achieves a stable frame of mind. "Most people cannot even get to this [heightened] state, but there *is* beauty in being this way," says Gray. Today, Plath would be treated with medication and would lose access to her manic states. It is Gray's belief, however, that "if we continue to treat all our artists [with medication], we won't have any art left because, unfortunately, it takes some really high and low states for a lot of this greatness to be created. If everyone is medicated, creatively where are we going as a society?"

The particular method Plath/Greenwood uses to end her life—death by hypoxia—provided the device that Gray needed to illustrate the already-exaggerated highs and lows inherent in Esther Greenwood's character. Stage three of hypoxia—the one preceding death—consists of vivid hallucinations. Gray chose to use Esther's hallucinations to allow her to reflect on her life. She achieves this with impressive skill and imagination. After Esther removes her head from the oven, it—the oven, whose name we soon learn is Olson—begins a conversation with her. We know this because it flashes a light as it speaks in a sing-song language that only Esther understands. Esther vocalizes Olson's lines as well those of all the filmed characters. As she interacts with them, they move their lips and she fills in all the words and vocal mannerisms, from Ned Pews, to a German father, a Southern mother, a crying baby, and a Russian-accented "Babylonian whore" claiming she is Dostoevsky. Gray does this so artfully and with such perfect

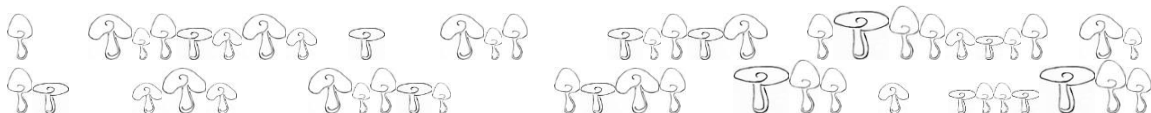


timing that one forgets it is she and not the other, who is actually speaking. In the case of Olson, Esther's response makes it clear what his motives are. As the play progresses, Olson becomes Esther's ally, partner, and most intimate friend; after all, he is the one she is depending on to transport her out of this life, a process that has already begun.

Shortly after Olson's introduction, Esther transforms into a hyped-up, loudly enthusiastic, bright-smiling, cooking show hostess. She, like Sylvia Plath, loves to bake and has two darling, demanding little children, and a philandering husband in search of his muse. When I saw the play, the presence emerging from the oven looked much like a typical 1950s' housewife with a nondescript hairdo and subtle make-up. As the play evolved, however, Esther acquired *commedia dell'arte* traits—big wild hair, large, bright red lips and cheeks, and heavily blue-shadowed eyes. In fact, the whole piece eventually contained more such elements, heightening its satire and emphasizing the mad qualities of its heroine. The first recipe Esther offers on the "Better Tomes and Gardens" cooking show is a Fifty-two Liar Lasagna, the ingredients for which include one adulterous husband prepared with "two screaming children, three ounces of ambition, four unchopped poems, five cups of testosterone, and one Babylonian whore," the last ingredient being the adulterer's current Muse.

The video sequences that John Farmanesh-Bocca directed, filmed and acted as a satirically histrionic (and philandering) Ned Pews, became the vehicle for all of Esther's projections. Through Esther's eyes (and the actor's vocalizations), the audience is exposed to the sight and sound of her memories, distorted as they may be, of her parents, her children, her husband, his mistress, and herself as a young girl. Esther's interactions with the other characters are so real that it is easy to forget they are on film.

The video segments augment the satirical-serious polarities of the piece—one moment creating laughter, the next sadness—and manage to move between the two believably. Some of the moving images of Esther's (Gray's) face are extremely effective, exposing glimpses of the magnitude of her sorrow. Whether one perceives the sobs expressed by Esther in the video as melodramatic, therefore funny, or as springing from true despair, therefore heartbreaking, is subjective, depending upon one's age, sex, nationality, and perception of the world. But, to my mind, the combined losses of her husband and her poetry are the factors making Esther's life so unbearable that they drive

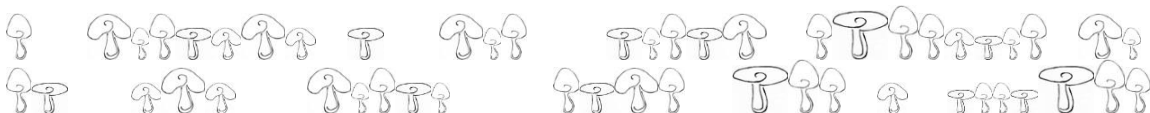


her to end it, and, even in its exaggeration, the scene was heartbreaking.

Some reviewers viewed the use of Esther as heroine instead of Sylvia, bringing the larger-than-life dramas created around the two great poets down to a smaller size, rendering their problems mundane—just two folks in a messy marriage. However, for me, it was impossible to separate Plath's story from Greenwood's, or to forget that, no matter how difficult Plath's personality might have been, she was not only suffering from mental illness, but more than that, she was a victim of the all-pervasive belief that a man's artistic expression had more value than that of a woman's artistic expression. Plath herself believed this, diligently typing and submitting her husband's poems to publications and contests.

Whether or not women have internalized real respect for their own artistic output in relation to that of men is debatable. Gray, born nearly a quarter-century after Plath died, has chosen to use a male pseudonym—Edward Anthony. With Sylvia Plath, already perceived by many to be excessively emotional, Gray thought people would be less likely to attend a show written by a woman on the subject. She was also wary of announcing that writer and actor were one because in her experience: "Shows that are written and performed by the same person usually reek of narcissism and self-confession. I knew from the start I wasn't writing about myself, and it created a real detachment between author and actor." Gray also appreciates that audience members are more honest with her about the piece if unaware that she's the author. Her intention, she says, was to achieve "a chance for some objectivity, and to keep audiences from being alienated."

As already noted, audiences were less alienated than opinionated, and the contrasts in interpretation were often pronounced. For example, American and British audiences responded quite differently, particularly to the humor of the piece. Americans accepted and laughed at Olson, the talking oven, early on, but the British did not respond to him at first. Gray thinks they found his dialogue somewhat annoying and became more involved when the cooking show started. In addition to recognizing and applauding the video meeting of Esther and Ned, the British were also more lighthearted about Esther's mental illness. As Gray points out: "The Brits laugh much longer into the play; they have humor about illness; whereas, the Americans stop laughing at a certain point, as Esther seems to suffer more."



The variety and intensity of the responses to *Wish I Had a Sylvia Plath* in its relatively short life to date attest to the strength of the writing and the production. Its reception in October 2007 at the symposium of Plath scholars was a surprise to Gray, who expected a mixed, if not clearly hostile response to the broadness of her approach. But, on the contrary, scholars were very moved. In Gray's view, "What's actually moving them is the base of humanity in it, what's moving them is the human DNA, the patterns of tragedy. Academics are not accustomed to processing Plath in a human patterned way and not accustomed to processing the tragicomedy of that. In this case, the medium is the message." Gray once again credits her collaborator, Farmanesh-Bocca for helping to make *WIHASP* accessible. "It took John, someone removed from the intellectual approach to Plath, to bring about a visceral reaction." And, it took many auspicious converging circumstances, opportunities, minds, hearts, and perseverance to manifest such an evocative piece. Early on in the play, Esther proclaims, "I'm attempting to savor my own death here." Gray has more than succeeded in cooking up an event to be savored long after it has been consumed.

