

The Women's Experimental Theater (1976-1986) founded in NYC by Clare Coss, Sondra Segal and Roberta Sklar flourished for a decade as a part of the vibrant second wave of the feminist community and movement.

*The following excerpts of our words from **Women in Theater/Compassion and Hope** by Karen Malpede published by Limelight Editions, 1983 (Page 235-244), are a brief attempt to describe the principles upon which the Women's Experimental Theater (WET) was based. The work, so deeply a part of our lives both then and now, presents a surprising challenge to try to capture and convey in the now. Rather than look back, we decided to quote here some excerpts written in the early 1980's that we hope will shed light on this unique time in our movement and lives. – Sondra and Roberta Segal-Sklar*

“The Women's Experimental Theater creates and performs theater by and for women. We are dedicated to the evolution of a feminist theater aesthetic and to the establishment of women's theater as a form of expression within the arts. Our program includes the creation and performance of collaborative works, the development of experimental methods of acting to extend the performance expression of the female experience, and the development of feminist research forms through workshops and public events with hundreds of women on themes relevant to our experience. Based in NY City WET performs and offers workshops throughout the United States.”

“The work of the Women's Experimental Theater is predicated on the belief that women have a separate and distinct experience. Our plays seek to give testimony and stature to the uniqueness and stature of that experience.”

“We call upon the woman in the audience, as a witness to the work, to experience herself as a woman at the center of her own life To acknowledge the validity of her experience, to feel her commonality with the other women in the theater- on and off the stage, to reflect on separateness, to consider change, to celebrate community and self.”

“The feminist actor gives testimony to the ability of women to change. We witness the woman performer as she applies consciousness and choice in her presentation of self and character at the same time and as she demonstrates the capacity to shape and choose her own emotional experience. We see a woman in the playing space who is simply she. Then we see her enact another and also be herself at the same time. And see her comment on it. All of these levels are a testimony to our own capacity to do the same thing in our own lives.”

“An all woman audience: has the space for an unfettered response- and it can and often does take off in celebration of itself.” [While we performed for widely diverse audiences we kept the all woman audience a part of our practice.]

The Matrilineage is a founding principle and practice of WET: Naming and reclaiming our matrilineage , and exploring the meaning of the *universal truth* that every woman is a daughter. This was a fresh and even startling revelation to us in 1976. Naming researching and understanding our matriline became a fundamental building block of our work.

Example:

I am Sondra
Daughter of Lil

Daughter of Sarah Rebecca
Daughter of Tzvia
Daughter of a woman in Austria
Whose name I don't know.

Why do we need a feminist theater?

Is there such a thing as a universal?

What is worthy of our artistic attention and consideration?

What is the place of women's experience in the theater?

Is childbirth as worthy of artistic consideration as are concepts of Time and Space?

Does the mother/daughter relationship have less impact on the culture than the father/son relationship?

Are the experiences of women universal experiences?

What would make acting a feminist act?

Who is the audience for feminist theater?

What does a feminist performer look like?

What is the sound of her voice?

Can you approach any material from a feminist perspective or is there a feminist content?

Does Feminist Theater have a history?

Do you feel represented by the women in King Lear?

Was Sarah Bernhardt a feminist actress when she played Hamlet?

Must we have an all women audience?

Must we have all women performers?

Is feminist theater art?

What is the relationship between the performer and the witness when they are both women?

Whose interests does a women's theater serve?

Why does taking care of yourself so often feel like you are betraying others?

Is feminist theater dangerous?

For whom?

Works by the Women's Experimental Theater:

The Daughters Cycle Trilogy: Daughters, Sister/Sister, Electra Speaks

by Coss, Segal and Sklar; (created and performed 1977-86)

Women's Body and Other Natural Resources: Food, Foodtalk, Feast or

Famine by Segal and Sklar ;(created and performed 1981- 1986)

The Women's Experimental Theater was in residence at ***The Women's Interart Center***, NYC and developed and performed their work during the theater seasons of 1977 through 1987.

Themes central to the work of the Women's Experimental Theater:

Deconstructing the Family Romance

Roles and relationships possible for women within the family

Daughterhood

Domestic violence/ societal violence

Woman's body as a natural resource

Woman's body exploited

Food as Sustenance

The Family Table

Feminist Locations and Dislocations

Deconstructing the myths of women's experience

Speech and Speechlessness

Separation and Survival

Constructing the Self