

4-11-2019

Accidentally Pioneering A Movement: How the Pioneer Players Sparked Political Reform

Sami Hansen
Belmont University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/burs>

Part of the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hansen, Sami, "Accidentally Pioneering A Movement: How the Pioneer Players Sparked Political Reform" (2019). *Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS)*. 7.
<https://repository.belmont.edu/burs/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Events at Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Belmont Undergraduate Research Symposium (BURS) by an authorized administrator of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

Sami Hansen

Dr. Al-Shamma

Theatre History 1

20 September 2018

Accidentally Pioneering A Movement: How the Pioneer Players Sparked Political Reform

Theatre in the twenty-first century has been largely based on political and social reform, mirroring such movements as Black Lives Matter and Me Too. New topics and ideas are brought to life on various stages across the globe, as all artists alike are challenging cultural and constitutional structures in their society. But why are these movements so successful? Specifically focusing on the feminist movement, political theatre on the topic of women's rights can be traced back to an acting society called the Pioneer Players, made up of British men and women suffragettes in the early twentieth century. According to Greg Satell, author of a 2016 article entitled, "What Successful Movements Have in Common", there are five common themes found in influential movements that can also be applied to the Pioneer Players, who unknowingly used these factors to create political reform in their time.

Founded by Edith "Edy" Craig in 1911, about midway through her career in the arts, the Pioneer Players were formed based on a desire for uncensored and progressive British theatre in the time of World War I. Daughter of famous actress Ellen Terry and sister to Edward Gordon Craig, a famous theatre practitioner at the time, her familial connections would be essential to the growth and vitality of the amateur society. Against all odds the Pioneer Players flourished during their years of operation, gaining national and international notoriety as the world sat on the edge of its seat to see what they would do next. For fourteen years, the society was able to put on

plays that challenged the views of civilian life during the war, as well as pushing against the censorship found in early 1900's British theatre.

“Clarity of purpose is a common theme in successful movements” (Satell). The Pioneer Players focused on a variety of reforms, first looking toward the suffragette movement. The name itself was chosen because ‘pioneer’ was a widely used term in the women’s rights movement of the time. Developed from the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL) and the Women’s Freedom League (WFL), the men and women of the group rallied to put on theatre that challenged anti-suffrage arguments and to create a platform for the voices of those who otherwise would be silenced. Creating a foundation for minorities to climb on, the Pioneer Players quickly grew in numbers with highly regarded public figures, including actresses, joining the ranks. The group started with a focus on women and their role in society, but their genius and longevity were in the overall fluidity of their purpose.

The society’s focus would shift as new major events and ideas came to light, as well as with what members took an interest in. A third of the plays were international pieces, translated into English by the society, or a friend of the society, to be put on during the season. In the early 1900s, British theatre was highly censored in what nationality the play was due to, as stated by Dr. Katharine Cockin, “xenophobia ... at its height and anything perceived to be ‘foreign’ was treated with great hostility” (“Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players,” 122). Authors’ nationality varied, with Russian and French being the two most commonly translated in the group’s roster. Audiences were both disgusted and intrigued, creating a following that would fill the seats of each show. Thus the purpose was officially changed, creating a new drive to continue the group’s work, ultimately keeping the reform movement alive.

The second theme seen in a successful movement is that “values are more important than slogans” (Satell). Values spread among a group of people will be more effective than creating a campaign slogan to attract new members. The Pioneer Players did not have a slogan, but their actions spoke louder than any phrase would. Everyone who was a member of the society was also a contributor to the productions. With committees designated to different aspects of the group, members were able to have a say in the way the society was operated. Values were upheld through a check and balance system between the committees, so no one could hold all of the power and there was a majority ruling. Annual reports were written with complete transparency, so everyone was held accountable to their role or position with the Pioneer Players and financial information was made public.

With each season that the Pioneer Players produced, there was an understanding that most plays would only be performed once or twice to keep with the ideals of “pioneering in the dialogue they created with innovators ... and challenging in the issues with which their brand of ‘the play of ideas’ were prepared to engage” (Cockin, “Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players” 124). Differing from other societies at the time, the diverse group of playwrights enabled the Pioneer Players to collaborate and incorporate different points of view and different voices into their season. There was a show to appeal to a wider audience, as seen in the fourth season with works like Isi Collin’s *Sisyphus and the Wandering Jew*, *The Theatre of the Soul* written by Nikolai Evreinov, and Constance Campbell’s *A Dilemma*. A couple of performances were also paired with fundraising for various war charities, which created a positive bond between the Pioneer Players and audience members as they came together to support the British military.

With impact being at the forefront of the group's mind, the values fell into place and kept the Pioneer Players alive whenever difficulties struck.

Another successful tool implemented by the Pioneer Players was the idea, "when small groups connect ... they gain their power" (Satell). During the time period of the organization, the Pioneer Players was a "subscription society," meaning that all of its members paid dues and in later years, an entry fee. Due to the war, most of the people involved were upper middle class and the social elite, which created a smaller pool of participants under the organization. Most members were also a part of another society, like the AFL and the WFL, which created a network of connections that would be useful to the Pioneer Players for finding spaces to perform in and inviting patrons to attend. Keeping the group smaller, but stretched across multiple platforms, allowed for the society to be entirely self-sufficient and operational during a time of financial difficulty for the British government.

The group gained power because of the influential public figures, including playwrights like Bernard Shaw, that were respected in British society. Privately run, the government could not preside over the organization, allowing for the group to be independent in a strongly censored market. Full of mainly amateur actors, the passion and drive of these artists created a charged atmosphere that inspired everyone who was in the presence of a member. The movement inspired women and as noted by Virginia Woolf in *Women and Fiction*, "women were finding the freedom to occupy themselves more than hitherto been possible with the craft of letters." As women started making a name for themselves in society, the writing of such women changed and flourished under the movement's inspiration. Successfully, the movement inspired women to step out beyond the roles dictated to them and influence a new generation of women artists.

“The truth is that movements rarely, if ever, create change themselves. Rather, they inspire change through influencing outsiders” (Satell). Although the Pioneer Players were made up largely of suffragettes, Edy Craig’s mission when starting the society was to create a space where political propaganda and reform could be explored. The members embraced more obscure and avant-garde pieces because of the opposition that was reflected in the audience. The goal of the Pioneer Players was to bring to light the thoughts and ideas of a country that was just starting to come out of its shell, slowly accepting new voices and points of view into the arts. The group also challenged the censorship of plays, which the British government had restricted to mostly British white male playwright pieces. This abandon of precedence was the seed that started to change British theatre in the mid to late twentieth century, as more and more “controversial” pieces were performed in mainstream theatre houses.

The productions of the Pioneer Players were widely talked about, often sparking debates about the topics of the shows performed. Many critics disliked the idea of women outside of societal norms, whether it was because of a woman playwright, a female character who was more sexual in nature, or even a working woman being portrayed on stage. *Macrena*, written by Christabelle Marshall under the pseudonym Christopher St John, was written about an order of nuns being abused. As most anti-suffrage propaganda featured rape and violent acts against women, the Pioneer Players didn’t attempt to change the opinion of critics, but rather to bring attention to the actions of the opposition in hopes to encourage self-reflection. As stated by Dr. Cockin in *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*, “The Pioneer Players responded in engagement with the political and the play of ideas, which was often indirect, thought-provoking and perplexing” (113).

The final factor that was successful in keeping the Pioneer Players alive was the idea that “lasting change does not come when one side delivers a knockout blow to the other, but when both sides are able to claim the victory as their own” (Satell). The end of the Pioneer Players came when political reform theatre was able to take on a movement of its own and the society was unable to keep up with the rapidly changing pace. Although the end of the society’s era came with an unfortunate scandal, the effect was already taking shape. Theatre exploded across the globe as more theatre styles were being created, with Great Britain’s mainstream theatre opening up its door for more diverse pieces of theatre. No longer were conservative pieces written by white British males the norm, as Russian and French playwrights became popular in Western theatre, along with a newer generation of women playwrights.

When the Pioneer Players were formed, it was not with the idea of sparking an entire movement or even changing the norms of twentieth-century British society. The goal was to create a space where a wider variety of plays that spoke about a controversial topic could take place. Men and women were given the chance to put on exploratory pieces that introduced new cultures and new points of view. The outcome of the society was a successful start to the political reform theatre movement because of the passion and drive of its members. Patrons and actors alike worked together to open up the realm of genres and new ideas to a rapidly changing society. The Pioneer Players inadvertently checked off all the boxes determined by author Greg Satell in 2016 to be factors that contributed to a successful theatre movement in the 1910s. Challenging the traditional viewpoint of theatre, the Pioneer Players were an influential force behind the opening up of theatre to avant-garde, political reform, and uncensored theatre to a decade worth of audience in Great Britain, allowing for change to occur and theatre to flourish.

Works Cited

Cockin, Katharine. *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. Print.

Cockin, Katharine. *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage*. Palgrave, 2001. Print.

Fisher, James. "Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players' Production Of 'Mrs. Warren's Profession.'" *Shaw*, vol. 15, 1995, pp. 37–56. *JSTOR*, Web.

Joannou, Maroula. "'Hilda, Harnessed to a Purpose': Elizabeth Robins, Ibsen, and the Vote." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2010, pp. 179–200. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, Web.

Maunder, Andrew. *British Theatre and the Great War, 1914-1919: New Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Print.

Melville, Joy. *Ellen and Edy*. Pandora, 1987. Print.

Satell, Greg. "What Successful Movements Have in Common." *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business Review, 30 Nov. 2016, hbr.org/2016/11/what-successful-movements-have-in-common. Web.