

Playwright Stephen Jeffreys writes about his rehearsed reading of *Votes for Women* by Elizabeth Robins.

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The Arts: Courting a pioneer Even the most dedicated theatre-goer won't have seen *Votes for Women* by Elizabeth Robins, controversial in its day and now almost forgotten. Playwright Stephen Jeffreys explains why he wanted to revive it

ProQuest databases documents the article by abstract, only, with the above full title.

Mabel Smith, then the literary executor of the Robins papers forwarded to me the printed copy. Her handwritten comments are imaged and transcribed on the final page.

Abstract:

Two plays with the common theme of the private and public morality of politicians were programmed for 1907. Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women* was well received by audiences and although the critics jibbed at its political message, they could not deny its technical skill.

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A few weeks ago, Ian Rickson, the Royal Court Theatre's artistic director, asked me to direct a rehearsed reading of a favourite play. This would stand alongside the choices of three other playwrights (Caryl Churchill, Joe Penhall and Rebecca Prichard) in a short season prior to the company's imminent return to Sloane Square. It seemed a good idea to present something which even the most assiduous play-goer would not have seen and I decided on *Votes for Women*.

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Courting a pioneer

The year 1907 was one of the most interesting in the history of the Royal Court. It was the last of three stirring seasons presented by Harley Granville Barker and JE Vedrenne in which the producers attempted to bring serious drama to a London theatre scene dominated by the "society play" with its extravagant costumes and vapid concerns.

Two plays with the common theme of the private and public morality of politicians were programmed for 1907. Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women* was well received by audiences and although the critics jibbed at its political message, they could not deny its technical skill.

The second, Granville Barker's *Waste*, was not performed at all. It was refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain because of its references to the then criminal operation of abortion and did not make its debut until 1936.

Waste has since gained a regular place in the repertoire while *Votes for Women*, Robins's only completed play, has almost disappeared from view, rescued largely by Dale Spender and Carole Hayman's Methuen edition of suffragette plays.

The different fate of the two plays is curious. Robins's play also touched on the subject of abortion and should, logically, have been banned as well. That it was not is partly due to the delicacy with which she handles the references and partly to Granville Barker's more focused dissection of contemporary politicians.

Robins attacks the entire male sex, and the more general nature of her political point may have rendered it less threatening to the powers immediately behind the Lord Chamberlain than Granville Barker's depiction of the struggle for power within his imaginary Cabinet.

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the company's imminent return to Sloane Square. It seemed a good idea to present something which even the most assiduous play-goer would not have seen and I decided on *Votes for Women*.

Robins was an American, born in Louisville, who pursued an acting career. She was the first woman to play Hedda Gabler in English and built up her Ibsen portfolio until, in one season in 1893, she played Hedda and three other major Ibsen heroines in a single season.

But the success of her career was undermined by family tragedy: on the night of her first acting triumph, she learned that her father had committed her mother to a mental asylum; while she was on tour with actor-manager Edwin Booth, her husband drowned himself in Boston's Charles River.

EVEN before retiring from the stage at 40, Robins pursued a literary career. Her early short story *Miss de Maupassant* strikes a typical note. A London publisher excited by the discovery of a new novelist rushes to the Isle of Wight to meet him, anxious only that his new protégé should cut the racier sections of the novel which are far in excess of the good taste of the times.

He is discomfited to find the author a young woman, but, remembering the sexual explicitness of the novel, makes a pass at her. She turns him down just as a telegram arrives from one of his readers informing him that the great novel has been stolen from an untranslated work by Guy de Maupassant.

Distinctively, Robins employs narrative tension, deft comedy, political insight and a subtle sexual undercurrent to beguile the reader.

Votes for Women is the story of a naïve young woman, engaged to a charismatic politician, who receives a political education at a suffragette meeting and subsequently discovers her lover's dark secret. The play exhibits the born playwright's ability to steer a course between social comedy, passionate drama and the discussion of ideas.

Its *tour de force* is its remarkable middle act, where Robins takes on the task of staging a political rally in Trafalgar Square. Technically this constitutes a brilliant development of the three-act form — finding a setting which contrasts as sharply as possible with the surrounding scenes of upper-class domesticity. It's hard to think of a comparable scene in British drama till the arrival of the political dramatists of the 1970s.

Regrettably, Robins never completed another stage play, although she recycled much of the *Votes for Women* material in her best-selling novel *The Convert*. Increasingly she became involved as a political activist. She died in Brighton at the age of 89, having lived most of her last 50 years in England.

The failure of *Votes for Women* to find a place in the repertoire is partly explained by its prohibitively large cast. Perhaps too the suffragette issue is considered to be dated. But the play also examines the questions of whether a political movement should pursue a strategy of peaceful co-operation or violent confrontation, and whether there is a direct link between private and public morality — questions which are still relevant today.

Working on the play, I have become slightly nostalgic for an age when playwrights wrote directly about public figures with a sense of ease.

The world of Robins and Granville Barker may be limited in its milieu, but Cabinet ministers roll up on stage with no sense that the author is straining to bring them to life. It's hard to imagine, say, a Jack Straw figure in a play by Jonathan Harvey or Rebecca Prichard. The scale of the lives we stage has shrunk. We could use another Elizabeth Robins now.

'Playwrights' Playwrights' begins today at the Duke of York's Theatre with David Mamet's 'Speed-the-Plow' starring Patrick Marber and Mark Strong. 'Votes for Women', with Bill Nighy and Anna Chancellor, is on tomorrow. Sophocles' 'Antigone' and Wallace Shawn's 'Our Late Night' will be on next week.



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Picture: MANDER & MITCHENSO

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Elizabeth Robins stars in an 1891 production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Vaudeville theatre in London

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