

AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUISE PAGE

Pilar Zozaya

Last January Ms Louise Page visited Barcelona. She had been invited by the British Council to give one of the talks in the series “Contemporary English Writers III”. In spite of her busy timetable, Ms Page gave me her time most generously and answered all my questions with unfailing enthusiasm and interest.

Pilar Zozaya. I know that you do not like labels, not even ‘woman playwright’, which you discard with a definitive ‘because it classifies me as second best’; nevertheless, how would you describe your experience as a woman who writes for the theatre? and how would you define your position in relation to other women playwrights?

Louise Page. I started writing plays before I’d ever seen plays by other women and it never, never occurred to me that as a woman I couldn’t write plays. If I’d known then what I know now! It’s really tough, but at eighteen, you think you could do anything. I went to University, I did drama—I was actually taught by David Edgar—I was part of the group that did playwriting and nobody ever said to me, ‘you’re a woman you can’t do this’. So the first work I saw by a woman was my own work. The next work I saw was *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* by Pam Gems which, of course, at that stage was a wonderful thing. Here was a play by a woman almost in the West End—it was in the Mayfair. I went to see it and I really didn’t connect with it, at all, because it was a different generation of feminism from mine. In a sense what is very sad about it is that what they call ‘the generation of women playwrights’—which always tends to be Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Louise Page, Timberlake Wertenbaker, now just Charlotte Keatley and Sarah Daniels—is the same group that I’ve been in for the past fifteen years. It really frustrates me about Caryl and Pam because they’re actually older than me. I think Pam is thirty years older than I am, Caryl is probably twenty years older, Timberlake is ten years older, and we’ve all been put together as ‘this generation’. That is something that has happened to the women, because the women are women. That hasn’t happened to the men. The men are of Pinter’s generation, of Wesker’s generation, Brenton’s and the Portable theatre. I think there is a huge difference between us women playwrights. I think it comes from a different perception of men. I grew up in a family where it never really occurred to me that girls couldn’t do the same things as the boys. I think there are tremendous problems in what I would see as a patriarchal system, but I never thought in the end that the men were the real ‘baddies’. Actually it’s far more the system and at the same time as women want things, men want things, and I think a lot of men are very trapped in their roles. You’ve only got to see the number of suicides among men who’ve

found they've been made redundant. They feel they can't go on, they can't keep up the mortgage payments, they are therefore redundant to their families, which seems to me a very tragic situation. I think it's probably to do with my notion of liberation. My notion of liberation comes through education. You can't just have liberation you have to have the education process in order to achieve this and then the men have to be educated in the same ways as the women. In racial politics, a wide majority has to be educated to understand a black man and see where that culture comes from and what they perceive. I also think that, on the whole, women are their own worst enemies! I went to a conference in Athens last year and we all met, all women, the night before and had this very nice dinner. Everything was very informal. But the next morning, I didn't recognize them, they'd all dressed up! They all had their shoulder pads on, their make-up and people kept going and getting in the lift and saying, 'Good morning', but I couldn't recognize them. It was also very interesting because none of the women would speak first. It was a conference on women in the theatre and they all said, 'I can't talk' and in the end I said, 'I'll talk first'; otherwise we were never going to begin this Conference! I think it's that thing of fear and it's that thing of holding back. I don't know how you overcome that, because, actually, however much self-confidence you give somebody, some people just can't do things! I think you can give self-confidence, but self-confidence about what you can do in a situation with five people is very different from what you can do in a situation with a hundred people and I think being a playwright is a very public experience. It's not like one person reading your novel and he gets half way through it and puts it down; if you're in the theatre and you see people in the audience getting-up and leaving or not coming back after the interval you can justify it by thinking: 'They've got baby sitting problems', 'Their stomach's upset', 'They're worried about the fact that they left the iron plugged in', all those reasons, but it is very difficult. I think certainly if you're a woman with a family, working in the theatre is very difficult; the hours are very, very difficult and it's a public arena and there's public criticism, and you always have to be that thing called 'a woman' as well, which gets terribly boring. I've certainly got very tired of that thing of being a woman writer and being expected to be certain things. You go to a conference and it's, 'Here we are, David Edgar will talk about his work, Hanif Kureishi will talk about his work, Willy Russell will talk about his work, and Louise Page will talk about the problems of being a woman in the theatre'. So the work is never discussed because the problem is always discussed, and there's certainly no doubt when you go to see people in theatres they want you to write about women. They say, 'But, what about women's perspective on it?', and you answer, 'Well, this is the perspective I have'. The number of times I've been asked why I didn't write about men in *Golden Girls*!; it's a sort of cliché; they just think it would be more exciting, but you couldn't do the play if it was about men! The same criteria actually don't apply.

P.Z. Have you ever thought about writing a political play, such as those written by Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, or David Edgar?

L.P. I would say *Hawks and Doves* is a very political play, because it is about actually what happens if you don't have money and there is a notion that if you are poor you cannot do certain things. Every time they have a debate about people being poor, they say, 'People who are poor should not have televisions' but, why aren't they supposed

to have televisions? what are you supposed to do all day if you have no work?... I always say that is a political play and I do think the play is political. It's only I'm not considered to be of that generation.

P.Z. In 1978, you wrote *Tissue*. Critics and audiences could not believe that this was the work of a 23-year-old woman, how did you conceive the idea of writing about breast cancer? Did it involve a lot of research?

L.P. It did actually. I wanted to write a play about the perception of women's bodies and the way that women's bodies are used to sell things. If you go to the Motor Show a naked woman is draped across the car, and why is that supposed to be attractive? That constant image of women, I mean, young women, to sell things. There is a whole thing at the moment at home about one of the newscasters who has been told she must wear shorter skirts and show more leg; she is supposed to be reading the news, but it is about being sexy and attracting people to watch because you have a sexy presenter. I was interested in that. When I first went to meet the people I was working with, we just talked about the images of women you see —the 'page—3 girls'— and that whole debate... and because women with naked breasts appear all over the place in England, I was very much interested in that notion of breast cancer, that form of mutilation which was the form you came up against. If you are a woman, besides a sex mate, and you're presented with page-3 everyday that's a very difficult thing. I wrote the draft of the play first, because I knew that if I went and talked to people who had breast cancer then I would find it very traumatic and I would write their stories rather than a general piece. Then I went and I interviewed women who had breast cancer, and surgeons. I went round breast clinics, then did rewrites from that. It's funny because at the time it was regarded as incredibly brave and now, Samuel French published it, so he sends me the royalty statement and then I realize some Bank co-operative society has done a performance of *Tissue*! Actually, the interesting thing about it is, even if you look at all the research that has been done on breast cancer, sort of fifteen years later it's still more or less absolutely spot on, which is very interesting. The techniques actually haven't changed that much, and the way it's looked upon. But it was exactly the same with *Salonika*. When I wrote *Salonika*, I once went to Germany to see a production of *Salonika* and I waited at the airport for three hours because they decided I didn't look like the person who could have written *Salonika*. They were expecting me to be much older and I sat in this airport for hours... The most bizarre perception! So I don't know what you are supposed to look like.

P.Z. In the following year, you became Yorkshire Television's Fellow in Drama and Television at the University of Sheffield. This is the period when you wrote *Hearing* —once again about a physical problem— and *Flaws* —about the difficulties some modern industries have to overcome in order to make profits and be honest at the same time. What has happened to those plays? As they have not been published —I read them at Sheffield University in script form— have they ever been performed again?

L.P. No, they haven't. No, they haven't at all. It would be quite interesting to look at them again.

P.Z. In 1982, *Salonika* was staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs and won the George Devine Award, could we say that this play represented a kind of watershed in your career?

L.P. Yes, *Salonika* was a watershed. In the sense that everybody thought it was my first play, because it was done in London. I had actually done about six other plays by then and I'd done a lot of professional work. I think it was that thing, you know, you get the George Devine Award in the eighties—I now judge it—and it is a judgement by your peers, it is a judgement by people who work in the theatre, theatre practitioners and that's why it was a good award to have. It was also that I did a play at the Royal Court and I got astounding notices for it, so everybody suddenly sort of said, 'Well, look at these notices!'

I have to say I was surprised, because when I wrote *Salonika*, and I took it to the Royal Court, I did not feel it was any good. I took it like this: 'Well, here is your play, and I'm going on a holiday' and I went away for four weeks. When I came back, they told me, 'We're going to do this play', and I said, 'You can't, you can't, it isn't very good'. I was quite surprised by the reaction to it. Let me tell you a story. I was sharing a flat in London with some friends. As you know on Sunday morning the Sunday reviews come out—those which are considered on the whole the most interesting ones—and I picked up *The Observer* and, usually the new plays go at the end, so I read the last column and there was no review of my play, but one of my friends said, 'Actually it is, because it is the lead review!', but it never occurred to me to read that! It was also at the same time as *Top Girls*, so there was a whole lot because both theatres were sold out, and the Royal Court had these two plays by women that were being very successful. It was that thing of suddenly being taken seriously, people deciding that, 'Yes, you really were a playwright!', and you were going to stay around and you were not going to be somebody who did one play and disappeared like an awful lot of women who have done one, perhaps, two plays and that's been it.

P.Z. Even if *Salonika* was much praised as a strange, beautiful and profound play, it was also criticised for its deep sadness and bleak outlook on humanity, what do you think about this alleged pessimism?

L.P. Well, I think that depends on how you direct *Salonika*. You can go and see productions of *Salonika* in which you laugh all the way through and you can go and see productions of *Salonika* in which you weep all the way through. I don't think it is a pessimistic play. I think the last line where Enid says 'Look at the stars', she would never if she hadn't been through that experience. She's somebody who's always looked at the ground. She's always being saying 'Mum, don't tread in the dog dirt', 'Be careful of that...', and then suddenly at the end she says, 'Look at the stars' and she's talked to Peter about people going into space and there being other worlds, and that there is somewhere out there. She's a woman who's sort of been destroyed by that myth of her father, that he was a great hero, and you're all that remains of him, and therefore you can be great, because your father was great, but actually the myth is he wasn't, so that is destroyed. And, there is no doubt she has been used by her mother. The mother has used her.

Whenever Enid tries to go off and buy things, her mother says: 'Don't leave me, don't leave me on my own', she's one of those mothers; you see them all the time. You can sit in the street and you see there go Charlottes and Enids in that sense.

P.Z. Your next play was *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas*; how far is there an element of reportage in it?

L.P. It was all reportage. What we did was we had the book that was based on David Tinker's letters. So we had that as the first bit, then the two actors, the director and I abridged that and made it into a piece. Then for the second part, we interviewed lots and lots of people who had been involved in the war about their experiences. So we interviewed about twenty people and then we decided on five people and we used just their words. They were edited; the writing in that sense is that slight orders are changed, and things like that. There is only one bit I would call real writing which was the introduction which was her talk to the Rotary Club, which we hadn't got a recording of, so I sat down with the woman who the character is based on, and we sort of tried to reconstruct that. And that was the only bit that was really written in that sense. But the rest of it was just hours and hours of talking and tape-recording and going back and back to people, because the first time you interview anybody, they tell you one thing and the second time you get nearer the truth. Particularly if you're interviewing them for a play, they don't necessarily trust you because they know you're going to take their words and you're going to put them on the stage. You have to build up that whole relationship of trust. So, most of the people whose voices we used in the end we interviewed at least three times if not four times, and we spent a long, long time with them. We were a long period in forming it and intercutting it that was the real art, cutting it at the right point so it didn't get boring.

P.Z. Connected with my question about *Salonika* I would like to point out that, to my mind, one of the outstanding features of the play is the sharp dissection of the rapport between mother and daughter, a theme that you further develop to great effect in *Real Estate*. Could you please say something about this type of relationship which, moreover, is a recurrent theme in many women playwrights?

L.P. It's the classic women's relationship. I think it goes on all the time. It goes on, you see it with daughters who are now sixty with mothers who are eighty-five who are becoming the children again, and you see it with mothers with little girls, it seems to be a constant relationship of a sort of modern tyranny. I've got one friend whose daughter is desperate that when she goes to her school, she should wear make-up because she doesn't think it's right when her mother doesn't wear make-up, and she's constantly saying, 'Mummy, please, you're coming to school, would you put some lipstick on?'. It's a reversed tyranny, it's the little girl saying, 'Mummy you must dress up'. I think it's such a central relationship and it's very interesting! I think parent-children relationships are very, very little explored on the stage. There's *King Lear*, and some of those Shakespeare plays, but on the whole the more contemporary plays don't actually analyse family relationships. They don't analyse parents and children. You certainly don't see

children on the stage very often. Most of the characters you see on the stage tend to be childless, or they've abandoned their children, or they're free of all those ties. So very often, the plays that you see on stage are slightly fantasy worlds, because there aren't people who are rushing home to get there for baby sitters; women who have got to go home prepare a meal for six and they've got to do the shopping and they want to get their hair cut at the same time. You don't see those worlds, it's a sort of love plot. It's also that on the whole the women you see on the stage tend to be middle-class women. It's hard to put working class people on stage and give them a dignity. It's a very difficult thing to do, particularly the people that one would regard as inarticulate, because the stage, of course, is an articulate medium. For most people sitting in that play, if they met them in the street, they wouldn't be interested in Charlotte and Enid, actually, at all. They wouldn't really be interested in Gwen, she's too old to be interesting for many people. It's how you do that, how you give them a dignity and give them a recognizable relationship. If you give people a recognizable relationship you could write about a mother and daughter in Greenland, or parent-children in Tasmania, because it would still be a recognizable relationship. I think that's the great thing about familial relationships in plays and in drama. That's why on the whole soap-operas concentrate on those things. It's because it is an instant relationship for everybody. Everybody, even if they disown their parents, or disown their children, at some stage have a parent, and at some stage have something like that, as when they were a child constituted family, and most people, even if they now have no familial ties have a group of friends that constitutes their family. I think it's such a timeless theme and it seems to be one that people don't write about very much, I mean they write psychology books about it, you know: how to survive being a parent, and how to survive being a child! I think many women playwrights just feel that that area is just not being discussed, it's not being analysed. I think women still tend on the whole to feel they are the keepers of the family flame. It tends to be the daughters in the family who are worried about having the family Christmas or the family parties and all those things, and that tends to be more expected of them. It's different in all families, but I think that as a generalisation women are expected to do that far more than the boys. It's also the thing that when women get married the woman's family tends to say that they're losing a daughter, rather than gaining a son. It's always about losing your daughter when your daughter gets married. There are other things, I know that my brother's children are going to grow up being the children of my sister-in-law's family, more than being the children of ours.

P.Z. When in 1988, I wrote about *Real Estate* which I consider excellent, I questioned Michael Billington's statement: 'One thing Ms Page pins down poignantly is the lonely step-father's overpowering urge to hold a child in his arms' by remarking: 'I am not sure whether what Ms Page is trying to emphasize is not so much Dick's need to fulfil his late and surrogate paternity, but Jenny's egotistical and heartless selfishness'. Maybe, today, you would care to answer my implied question.

L.P. I think it's about taking men seriously in the play what he's talking about. But I think, yes, what I was trying to do is show that Jenny is egotistical and she's hard. When she talks about 'the baby will love me', it's the classic thing that people get wrong about

their children. People think babies love them because they're very small, because they're dependent, and again it's that whole image of what love is, and what parental relationships involve. I think that *Real Estate* is my most underrated play. I've always felt it, and that it's always the one that is sort of dismissed. I think it's because feminism doesn't like the notion that feminism is in many cases very selfish. When you hear people who call themselves feminists discussing their cleaning ladies: 'I'm a feminist but I've got this real little treasure and I only have to pay her three pounds an hour. I can go out and be big'. It's a sort of desperate issue! How far can feminism go in terms of being selfish? in terms of being egotistical? and actually, how egotistical can anybody be and still remain in society? and is there such a thing as society? and what are your relationships with people within it? I find it terribly distressing. You see old people crossing the road and nobody going to help them. It's like that man lying on the bench today; I thought, should we go and help him?, and going, 'no, don't, don't, because he might be a robber'. But you feel bad because there was a guy lying on the bench, and you think he might be in some sort of difficulty. We would've been useless because we don't speak Spanish, but you want to go and say, 'Can I help you?', and the fact is that I think a lot of people don't seem to do that any longer. I just think Jenny is a monster, and I think people's problems with the play are because they want to identify with Jenny. They want to be on her side, but she's behaved so badly. It's actually based on somebody I know who came down to breakfast one morning and said to her parents, 'I'm leaving home, my lawyer will be in touch about my possessions', which I felt, however badly you get on with your parents, is a terrible thing to do. I thought to deal with your parents through lawyers is ghastly. It was also based on another friend of mine who was about to have her second child and her mother turned up one day upon the doorstep and said, 'This is terrible she's about to have another baby and she said to me: "It's great you'll be able to look after them". But I don't want to look after them! I love them, but I don't want to look after them, and I don't want them there all the time'. This woman was planning to go back to work and the mother was very upset about it. And I said, 'But, didn't she discuss it with you?', she said, 'No!'. So the play came out of that. I think it also came out of *Salonika* in which the mother and daughter are together all the time, and so what happens if you have that bond where anybody goes away? Anybody who goes away for a long period of time and then turns up again is acting cruel. You see it sometimes with fathers who've gone off because they didn't like being with small children and actually one nice present for a twenty-five year old is to take her out for dinner. When you no longer have to take emotional responsibility, people will come back. Jenny comes back because she needs somebody to take emotional responsibility again, and she's rejecting Eric, who's offering her that, but she can't actually take that because Jenny's notion of relationships is that they're confrontational. So she actually finds it very difficult to have a relationship which does not contain that element of confrontation. And yet Dick accepts Jenny, because he's always felt he was the one who drove her out. So the guilt is coming through, and she needs him... Actually his wife has gone in the opposite direction, sort of gone away from him, and now somebody comes back and needs him... Somebody who also has a relationship with Gwen whom he loves, and it's that notion that 'I can get the mother back through the daughter'. So he can have this family relationship, which is what he was expecting when he married Gwen, and

actually it's what he's never had. Jenny behaved appallingly at eighteen. I think that if she hadn't thrown her keys in the river she would have come back. She would have carefully come back when nobody else was in the house and the first thing that would have happened is that somebody would have walked in and there would have been loud music from upstairs and they would have gone, 'Oh, she's back'. But she could never have come back if she'd had to knock at the door and say 'I'm sorry', because she doesn't have 'sorry' in her vocabulary.

P.Z. I think that another of the achievements in your plays is the way you overturn clichés and inveterate concepts. This is, for example the case both in *Agnus Dei*—where Agnes, the heroine, leaves her convent, after 25 years of being a nun, because she wants to be a priest— and in *Real Estate*—where men cook, stay at home and take care of the children, while women are successful in business. Would you like to say something more about this ingrained social distribution of role models and the way one could try to subvert it by means of a play?

L.P. It is by subverting it and it is by just saying: it is like this. It is not that a man could not cook if he tried for ten years, because this man [Dick in *Real Estate*] has been cooking for ten years and he's a good cook. I find most bizarre that whole issue of the priesthood; that notion that a priest has to be in the image of Jesus, which is therefore the notion that you are an image of God which makes God male! Actually it's a very, very interesting concept at the same time, particularly within the Catholic Church, that of worshipping Mary, but Mary is always the one who intercedes, so it's always the woman helping the man yet again. We had that whole extraordinary issue over the debate of women in the Church of England. They have to be in the image of Jesus so they've got to be Jewish, under thirty-three and that casts out most of the contemporary priests, but on the one hand that is just used as an argument, and on the other hand it is not. The best thing was when one of those hugely fat male vicars who was against the ordination of women was saying 'It would be so terrible if you had a pregnant woman, can you imagine what the cassock would look like over that huge tummy?'. I mean!, this is a real contradiction in terms. I think it's a fear of women, that constant fear of women and hatred, because of the unknown. I think it is very vicious, what women are supposed to wear, or what they are supposed to do, how they are supposed to behave and also a sort of lost thing because there's no doubt certainly that in medieval England women were far more involved in society. The early history of the church in England is people like Hildred Whitby who was the person everybody went to for advice, but all that has been downgraded and downgraded and downgraded. I think particularly the Catholic Church in England has suffered because Catherine of Aragon was divorced by Henry VIII because Anne Boleyn, a woman, tempted the King away, which led to the split with Rome, so it's even more scary and terrifying. I think people don't realize how angry women are. You're always expected to be passive and just wait. It's like the suffragettes just wait, just wait, just wait. All the time women have been told 'just wait, in ten years time it will be different, in five years time it will be different, just wait', but there comes a time when people can't afford to wait any longer and women are impatient too and they feel they've got to get on with it rather than just expecting the *status quo* to change. That actually you

have to be pro-active, that you have to go out there and try and influence change. If we think about what we were doing in Britain in the 1920s and 30s... Certainly during the war in Britain a single mother, because the father was off at the front for six years, was somebody celebrated, somebody wonderful. Now everything is completely changed and yet if you were back in the second world war and women had to work again, the whole situation would be reversed. At one moment you can do things—during the first world war women were building bridges across the Thames— and now they are not supposed to do things like that.

P.Z. *Golden Girls* was presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company, first in Stratford then in London in 1984. If *Salonika* marked a turning—point in your career, could we say that *Golden Girls* put an end to your being considered ‘the most promising playwright’ and made you a popular and fully—fledged dramatist?

L.P. Yes, certainly. It did!!

P.Z. Considering all the plays you have written, we may ascertain that you neither concentrate on a precise type of play nor on a given theme. On the contrary, each new work comes as a surprise. But, maybe, the greatest surprise was when you rewrote the old myth of Beauty and the Beast as a pantomime for Christmas 1985. What made you use this kind of material?

L.P. I was absolutely fascinated by the whole original bit of the story, because the bit you always have, as a girl, is the classic bit; it’s the line in *Tissue* which is ‘Women can love men even if they’re wrecks, it’s traditional’; it’s Jane Eyre loving Mr. Rochester and eventually, because of her, he gets his sight in one eye back and he can see her blue dress. It’s that classic myth. It’s the woman that marries the alcoholic because she can reform him; the woman who marries the rake because he will love her forever. It was very interesting to discover that, actually, there was a whole bit before the story as we know it of *Beauty and the Beast*, about the fact that he had a mother who was a warrior who ruled the kingdom for him, and the way he treated the wicked fairy and the way she behaved. It was the realization that there’s no such a thing as a happy ending, which I’ve always felt. I’ve always felt I wanted to know what happened at the end of fairy stories. But it seems to me the terrible bit in *Beauty and the Beast* is when they shot the adopted father out of the wedding ceremony. The sisters are taken in and married to courtiers. But he’s... Just in the sort of stories we all know: ‘Right, that’s it, thank you very much, you look after me and I’m a princess now’. It seems a terrible thing to do to a man who’s invested love and care. The most interesting thing was going to see the Disney *Beauty and the Beast*. It’s dreadful, but it’s absolutely fascinating in terms of political correctness, because Beauty is very, very dark, with dark hair and brown eyes, and the Beast is the one who has the blue eyes. The great thing about Beauty is she likes reading, so you first meet her going to change her library book; the thing she likes best in the Beast’s castle is when she goes into the library and she goes ‘Oh! books!’ and then she falls in love with him. She never reads the books, but it’s really interesting. And then, when she kisses him, her lips go pink. I hated it so much, but I started watching it for political correctness...

It's just that whole thing of what the fairy-stories are. It's like the Brothers Grimm and the way those stories were changed by the Victorians so that they became sort of nice and cosy, but they weren't. It's the original story of *Cinderella* she has two children before she wakes up and realises what's going on. They have all been changed, adapted, transformed into nice little sort of good girls who are rewarded by taming the beast, and he turns into a prince. It's still the myth, that there is a happy ending, that people fall in love and it's all nice ever after. Life is not all that easy...

P.Z. One of the crucial themes in *Housewives*, *Real Estate*, *Golden Girls* and *Diplomatic Wives* is the price women have to pay to be professionally successful. As all of them end rather bitterly, are you suggesting that a woman has to choose between a family and a career, and that she can never successfully combine both of them?

L.P. I think they do. I think there is still a price to pay. There is a way of combining roles but I think that until that sort of myth of you can be—you can be a perfect wife, you can be the perfect mother, you can be the perfect career woman, it can all be perfect—you have to let some of it go. It seems to me that, if you're talking about having families, the problem is the role of fathers in many ways fathering. There was a thing in the papers at home the other day about this wonderful school that had rearranged the school day for this teacher, who was a single parent, so he could collect his children from school at the end of the day. They haven't done that for any of the women staff, but they thought it was so wonderful that this man was looking after his children, that they were willing to rearrange the whole timetable for him. We all know many single women who cope with everything although their timetables aren't rearranged. I think it's the expectation of society. I think it's what we expect, that most women who're working are not doing what I would call having careers, they're working at a sort of much more simple level. If you're a woman with a career, it's much easier to combine it with a family because you can earn money and you can pay for help; you can afford to go and get ready meals from Marks & Spencer's, you don't have to do the work for which you're poorly paid and then buy the food and then cook it. I think it is such a huge social change... I'm not arguing at all for grandmothers to look after the children but I think the breakdown in society, and certainly in Britain where we have a movable society, means you may live two hundred miles from your nearest relative. It's one of the things that's made it harder. I think when you live in a fairly small nucleus of people it's easier; so that actually if you're exhausted at the end of the day, there's always someone who will give the children their tea that night and you can have them back at nine o'clock, but you've had a couple of hours. When there's a shared responsibility for children, old people, sick people... I think the pressure on women today is much greater. Because I don't think women were expected to be good at everything before. The Victorian notion of a woman with children... You only have to read Dickens or Jane Austen; the poorest of the poor in *Sense and Sensibility*, I mean Fanny's parents still have a servant and a girl who comes in, and they're regarded as being really poor. I still think that in most situations women have to be at least twice as good as the men in order to get to the same thing, and you're all the time expected to play the male game; if you're in a meeting you're expected to argue in a male way and actually if you argue a male way the men hate it, because you're

then being a man. I think there's a constant challenge... There is that external thing that women who have children and want to work are selfish, and that notion that women are doing men out of jobs. But it's the price you pay, perhaps you wouldn't have been educated... It's taken a hundred and twenty years since the First Education Act in Britain and this is where women have got to. It's all those sort of things that have always been there. In Victorian times women were lying on couches and having babies, but they were all bored stiff, having nervous breakdowns. Being ill made you important. There's still that thing, you see it very often, women as they get older pretend to be ill and frail because it makes them important. Those are the times when women get attention, when they're pregnant and when they've got very small children; then they become invisible, until they become old and time demanding. I think it is still very difficult for men. I think men do not like women having money in their own right, because it makes them independent. You can leave if you're having a relationship, you can choose to live on your own, entertain yourself. It is still a sort of strange assumption that men will pay. If we're out they'll always give the male friend the bill, won't they? even if I've got all the credit cards. But, you just have to get through it, you just have to stop being — you must have done it in your work — you just have to stop being discouraged by it, you just get on and eventually you do not notice it, which is terribly sad.

P.Z. Other playwrights work for precise theatrical groups, or they team up with other dramatists. You have never done so, why is that? do you see more disadvantages than advantages?

L.P. I've never worked for a precise definite group. Really, because I've never been invited. I think that, particularly in the beginning of my career when it was groups like Women's Theatre Group, I didn't want to work with them, an all-woman group. I didn't want to do plays for only women in the audiences. I didn't want to go into that ghetto because it seems to me that women know exactly what the problems are and the people that need to know about the problems are the men, really, and that by doing things with women in groups, I felt that it was just perpetuating that sort of a circle, that sort of depression and despair about it, about how terrible things were! So, at the time, there weren't many groups I wanted to work with, and now I think that particularly groups like [Théâtre de] Complicité, the performance groups, aren't really interested in the script and I am interested in the script, I'm interested in the preciseness of the work.

P.Z. Do you ever participate in the production process?

L.P. Yes, I do participate in the production process. I go to rehearsals. We're heavily unionized in Britain. They have to pay us for going to rehearsals, they have to pay us twelve days. So we're involved in the rehearsal process to that extent, which is nice. I love that. It's so nice when you've been working at home all day on your own, to work with other people.

P.Z. When you were interviewed in 1988 by Prof. Elizabeth Sakellariou, you declared you had just begun to read feminist science fiction and that you were quite 'interested

in the notion of writing a feminist piece of science fiction'. Have you carried out your intention?

L.P. Science fiction is fascinating because of where it can go. I haven't carried out the intention, but so often in science fiction a huge leap has been made and actually it's a fantasy and it's missed out several links in the process. What would interest me about writing something in the future is actually the language and the way in which language changes. One of the things I find constantly frustrating about science fiction is that they talk a sort of code form of dialogue, but the ways in which language moves on and the alterations very often aren't there. You watch *Star Trek* and everybody is talking exactly the same as they were talking in 1980 and they're using the same sort of buzz words. I think the feminist science fiction is a lovely sort of image of what it could be, but very often what I find when I'm reading it is: I wish it were a bit more based on the reality of now. I'm not interested in two thousand years from now, I am more interested in ten years, so I'm more interested in something like *The Handmaid's Tale* which I think is a very believable bit of science fiction. All the fertility statistics and the rise of fundamentalism in all religious sectors indicate that is the way that society could go, and I do actually find that believable, because it seems based on now, an analysis of now. But it's the feminist science fiction, particularly it's more the lesbian science fiction, which seems divorced from many life styles now, even contemporary lesbian life styles don't seem to be reflected by it.

P.Z. Finally, I would like to ask you to say a few words about the situation of the theatre in your country. Last September, when I listened to you addressing the 1st ESSE Conference, you did sound rather pessimistic. Do you still think that the future of the theatre in England is quite a bleak one, or is the economic recession and the system of subsidies beginning to improve?

L.P. The subsidized theatres can't afford to do new plays, for all sorts of reasons. They are getting less money from the Arts Council, the rate of inflation in the theatre has been far higher than the average rate of inflation, but the Arts Council grants have been paid for the low inflation. That's been a problem. There's a problem, more and more, with the regional theatres which is: actors don't want to go outside London and Birmingham and places like that, because they only have to get one day's filming in television and they'll earn more than they'd earn in a subsidized theatre for a week, so everybody would rather hang on in London; well, not everybody, but a substantial proportion of actors, and it certainly comes difficult to cast things. I think in recessionary times people can't afford to go to the theatre; that however cheap you make this ticket price, it's not just the ticket price, and the notion that it's the ticket price, in a sense, is a myth. A ticket price has a lot to do with it, but it's also the cost of a programme; if you go to a theatre you want to be able to have a drink at the bar, you have to park your car, you want to do all those sorts of things. Very often, now, people don't want to go into city centres at night because you're just terrified. So, all those things work against it and if you've got very little money it's cheaper to hire a video and buy yourself a bottle of wine for one theatre ticket. So people stay at home. The younger generation just don't go to the theatre. But

that's also partly to do with the reforms in the education system which means that you can no longer take children from your school to the theatre, because you can no longer ask them to pay for it. A whole lot of theatre visits now don't happen; children just don't go to the theatre, so, it's not something that people will grow up with. I think, in general, the question is absolutely desperate. I wonder whether in five years time there will be any new plays. Yes, there are all those theatres in pubs, and collective work and groups that've got together, but they're not in the theatres. I think that the problem must be that huge expansion of theatre building in the 1960s, and the cost of running all those theatres. The theatres are too expensive to run. Once you've got a theatre, something like the Birmingham Rep, and you have to pay more than thirty thousand pounds a year just to clean the windows, what are we talking about? where's the theatre? it's about cleaning windows. Once you've got theatres as those monuments of civic pride and you've got to maintain them, I think you've got a problem. I think all those sorts of theatres are really too big. There is that city pride 'We must have a theatre for a thousand people', and actually they didn't really work out that there were only five hundred people who were going to go to that theatre. The theatres do fifty per cent business so you go to the theatre and it's only half full and this is a depressing experience, because there's nothing more depressing than being in an empty theatre, however good the piece of work. It's very difficult to change all this, it's quite an important problem. The only thing is, we have to keep hoping! we just have to keep on writing the plays!

P.Z. Yes, definitely. Thank you, very much!

Barcelona, 14th January 1993.