


<b>Section A</b>		
<b>Institution:</b> University of St Andrews		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 27: English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The creation (and re-creation) of contemporary female heroines at the centre of new plays for the theatre.		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012 - 2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Zinnie Harris	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 17 September 2011 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 - 31 December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>Section B</b>		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Women have been under-represented in the theatre, in terms of the numbers of female playwrights whose work is staged, the number of main roles for women and the gender bias of the stories told. Professor Zinnie Harris has created 6 plays which put women at the centre of dramatic stories, creating substantial roles for women actors and making a considerable contribution to changes in the gender imbalance ingrained in most theatre. Harris's work has:</p>		
<p><b>1. increased the representation of plays by and about women in British and international theatre and catalysed changes in theatre practice.</b> These 6 plays have been translated into French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish and seen by more than 71,000 people in 10 countries at principal theatres – at times, by audiences of record size for the theatre concerned. Their critical and box office success influenced subsequent programming of drama by women and increased roles for women in professional theatre. In 2017, for example, five plays by Harris formed the core of the Edinburgh International Festival drama programme – a featuring of a diverse range of work by a female playwright almost certainly unprecedented in the Festival's history. In 2019, Glasgow's Citizens Theatre's decision to programme an entire season of plays by women was directly inspired by Harris's work.</p>		
<p><b>2. stimulated public debate about women's roles in theatre</b> in Britain, Europe, South Africa and Turkey, where Harris's <i>Meet Me at Dawn</i> catalysed debate about women's representation in drama and inspired ten new plays about gender and LGBT identity.</p>		
<p><b>3. left a creative legacy of 6 award-winning plays</b> that influence and inspire contemporary female dramatists. These works have: won the Berwin Lee award for best play in the USA/UK; won the Critics' Award for Best New Play, Scotland, once and been shortlisted twice; been shortlisted for the Susan Smith Blackburn award; and won a Herald Angel award.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Playwriting for stage, screen and radio has been integral to the School's creative work, research and teaching for a decade. The creative work of Harris and colleague Oliver Emanuel (winner of multiple awards for radio and theatre drama) is complemented by Dr Sam Haddow's research on theatre and political violence. Since 2014, their teaching and creative work has benefitted from the University's lease of the Byre Theatre (directed by former managers/directors of the NTS and Scottish Opera).</p>		
<p>Harris's writing is driven by the question: how do we challenge the representation of women in theatre? British theatre has a wonderful canon of plays but, historically, dramatists have tended</p>		

to put men at the centre of their stories, leading to a lopsided presentation of the world. Not only are women under-represented on stage, but also, where women *are* at the centre of modern plays, the story is often restricted to being about something that only concerns women ('women's issues'). The tradition of 'everyman' roles – for instance King Lear and Willy Loman – has few female equivalents. Harris responded by creating plays in which the central woman *is* the everyman character rather than being defined by her gender or romantic relationships.

The second catalyst for Harris's writing concerns the representation of women in ancient and canonical drama. In modern contexts, and with contemporary understandings of grief, ambition, frustration, depression and marriage, the psychology of these characters is often unconvincing; they are simplistically perceived as 'bad' or 'emotional' women rather than understood as complex and individual. Harris re-visited these stories and framed them around the woman's experience, so that the characters' choices and behaviour arise as much from their situations as from a received representation of the female disposition. The recreation of canonical female roles is a notable focus of Harris's work, including: the 2016 trilogy *This Restless House* re-creating Aeschylus's Clytemnestra and Electra from the *Oresteia* [R1] and her 2019 adaptation *The Duchess [of Malfi]* from Webster's source [R2].

Six of Harris's plays with women at the centre have been published by Faber during the assessment period, leaving a legacy of leading roles for women. The first was *How to Hold Your Breath* [R3; R5], a response to Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Researched and written during 2012-14, this was a new morality play that reflected on contemporary refugee crises and placed two women as everyman figures, in contrast to the prostitute and her male alter-ego in Brecht's play. Crucially, the women carry a universal story and are not seen in relation to a romantic attachment to a man, but as representative of humankind.

The research for and writing of the trilogy *This Restless House* [R1], which reworks Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, took place between 2013 and 2015. Harris placed Clytemnestra at the centre of part one of her trilogy (equivalent to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*), and then her daughter Electra at the centre of parts 2 and 3 (rather than the son – Orestes – as in the originals). Challenging received ideas of Clytemnestra (and later Electra) as a woman already capable of murder, Harris showed Clytemnestra affected and changed by the events of the play – not least, grief at the ritual sacrifice of her daughter.

The fourth play with women at the centre, *Meet Me at Dawn* [R4; R5] (researched and written between 2015-2017), drew inspiration from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice but was re-framed as a love story between two women, exploring grief after the sudden death of one of the lovers. In this play, Harris created an original narrative with two women at the centre but where the characters' sexuality was incidental rather than the main theme of the writing – an almost unprecedented move in modern theatre.

In 2018 and 2019, Harris wrote and directed a new adaptation of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* for the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh. *The Duchess [of Malfi]* [R2] explores female sexuality, disobedience in the face of controlling men and male rage; Harris's version uses the themes from the original but also engages equivalent contemporary contexts, including the #MeToo movement.

### 3. References to the research

The calibre of Harris's work is indicated by the fact that all these plays are published by Faber; R1 and R5 are both double-weighted REF2021 submissions.

[R1] Zinnie Harris, *This Restless House: Three New Plays by Zinnie Harris Based on Aeschylus' 'Oresteia'* (London: Faber, 2016). ISBN: 9780571332625. Winner of [Best New Play](#), Critics' Award for Theatre in Scotland, 2016; shortlisted, [Susan Smith Blackburn Award](#), 2016.

[R2] Zinnie Harris, *The Duchess [of Malfi]* (London: Faber, 2019). ISBN: 9780571355389. Shortlisted, [Best New Play](#), Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland, 2020.

[R3] Zinnie Harris, *How to Hold Your Breath* (London: Faber, 2014). ISBN: 9780571324927. Winner, [Berwin Lee](#) award for playwriting, 2015.

[R4] Zinnie Harris, *Meet Me at Dawn* (London: Faber, 2017). ISBN: 9780571341245.

Shortlisted, [Best New Play](#), Critics' Award for Theatre in Scotland, 2018.

[R5] Zinnie Harris, *Plays One: Further than the Furthest Thing, Midwinter, How to Hold Your Breath, Meet me at Dawn* (London: Faber, 2019). ISBN: 9780571356720.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Zinnie Harris has created 6 plays (described in section 2) which put women at the centre of dramatic stories, creating substantial roles for women actors and making a considerable contribution to changes in the gender imbalance ingrained in most theatre. Since 2015, these 6 plays have been seen by more than 71,000 people in 10 countries (the UK, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Turkey and the USA) and have been translated into 11 languages. They have changed programming practice at two major theatres and festivals, provoked international debate about women's representation in theatre, and leave a legacy of work that has influenced British, Turkish, Kurdish and Iranian playwriting about women.

##### 1. Harris's work increased the representation of plays by and about women in British and international theatre and catalysed changes to theatre practice.

(a) Increasing the representation of plays by women: All of Harris's plays received high-profile premieres at national or leading theatres. These plays about women were viewed by audiences of, at times, exceptional size for the theatres concerned; their critical and box office success prompted further productions, increasing the representation of plays by and about women in the UK and Continental Europe. For example, *How to Hold Your Breath* premiered on the main stage of the [Royal Court Theatre](#), London, for 8 weeks (48 performances) from February – April 2015. This production was attended by 19,126 people to a capacity of 98% (the second highest-grossing play in the theatre's history) [S1, p.1]. In 2015, it won the [Berwin Lee playwriting award](#) for best play in the UK/USA. It was then produced in prestigious theatres in France, Turkey, Sweden and Greece: in 2016, the six-month production at the Diana Theatre, Athens, for example, had over 22,000 people (attendees) while the production at Istanbul's DOT Theatre was attended by nearly 4,000 people (audience members), a record for the venue, leading to nominations in 8 of 11 categories in Turkey's most prestigious theatre awards [S1, p. 5]. In January 2017, it opened in the main theatre in [Gothenburg](#), Sweden. In 2018, it was produced and broadcast on [French national radio](#), read at the [Comédie-Française](#), Paris (the world's oldest theatre company and France's principal state theatre), and at the [Avignon Festival](#). In 2019, it played at the National Theatre of Sweden (the [Dramaten Theatre](#), Stockholm).

At the 2017 Edinburgh International Festival (EIF), Harris's work formed the [core of the drama programme](#) (and won a [Herald Angel award](#)) when the directors programmed her work and co-produced with two leading Scottish theatres: her trilogy *This Restless House* (winner, Best New Play, Critics' Award for Theatre in Scotland, originally produced by [The Citizens Theatre](#), Glasgow); her version of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (a co-production between the [Royal Lyceum Theatre](#), Edinburgh, and EIF); and the premiere of *Meet me at Dawn* (a [co-production between Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, and EIF](#)). *Meet me at Dawn* played to a capacity of 88% at the Traverse where it was seen by over 5,000 people; subsequent productions of *Meet Me at Dawn* include a month at the [Market Theatre](#), Johannesburg (South Africa's principal and most prestigious theatre) in 2018 and four months at [DOT Theatre](#), Istanbul (December 2017 – April 2018). The Turkish production was then re-created at the [Arcola Theatre](#), London, in 2019.

(b) Harris's work has catalysed changes to programming practice at two leading Scottish theatres and festivals: the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, the '[west of Scotland's major producing theatre](#)', and the Edinburgh International Festival, which in 2017 had an [attendance of more than 461,000 people from 83 nations, more than 2,200,000 users of online resources and ticket sales of more than GBP4,390,000](#). EIF's placement of a female playwright's work at the centre of their 2017 drama programme by staging a diverse range of Harris's plays, two in co-productions with other prestigious Scottish theatres, was almost certainly unprecedented in the Festival's history. Of the four world premieres in this 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary EIF (part of the world's largest arts festival), two were by Harris [S2, p. 10, 15]. Moreover, in 2019 the Citizens Theatre programmed new work by women playwrights, including Harris, in their season 'Citizens Women' "[putting women characters – and therefore women actors – centre stage](#)". The theatre's

Artistic Director directly attributed this decision to Harris's work which *"has led specifically to my programming a whole season of work at the Citizens that is written by women and which puts female characters at the heart of the stories that are told [...] having made this programming decision, it is beholden on me and other artistic directors to ensure that these stories remain central to the work we present"* [S3].

(c) Harris's work has fostered wider increases in women's representation in professional theatre in South Africa and the UK, in a context where only a fifth of English theatres have female directors controlling only 13% of the Arts Council budget [S4, p. 2]. Harris's plays provided opportunities for women actors in their thirties and forties to take centre stage roles at a time when work typically starts to thin as Kirsty Stuart (nominated for [Best Actress](#) at CATS awards for her lead role in [The Duchess](#)) attests: *"As a wom[a]n actor in my late thirties, it has been a frustrating few years [...but Harris's work is] creating roles for women and showing that stories with [older] women at the centre are just as thrilling, heart-breaking, terrifying, inspiring and watchable"* [S5, p. 1]. Several actors went on to win awards for these roles, including Pauline Knowles ([Best Actress at CATS](#) awards, 2016, for her Clytemnestra in *This Restless House*). Furthermore, the Market Theatre (Johannesburg) production of *Meet Me at Dawn* was *"supported by an all-women design and production team"*, the review for South African news website IOL implicitly attributing this to the subject of Harris's work: *"The play carries universal themes of grief and loss. But it is also centred around the relationship between two women"*. The novelty of this was also discussed by award-winning actor Pamela Nomvete on SABC News (South African state morning TV) in March 2018, Nomvete stating that ["the all-female team"](#) was one of the factors that 'attracted' her to the role [S5, p. 6].

## **2. Harris's plays catalyse national and international public debate about women's roles in theatre.**

Through her plays, Harris has been a major voice in raising debate on this topic. Public discussion of women's roles in theatre has burgeoned since 2015. Harris's role in the debate is clearly evident: Harris is often invited to comment on it; her influence on the debate is cited; and the topic is documented in audiences' responses to her plays. In a programme note for the 2016 all-women *Shakespeare Trilogy* at the Donmar Theatre, London, for example, *The Guardian's* Chief Culture Writer discussed the gender divide in theatre, noting: the *"main character [of How to Hold Your Breath], played by Maxine Peake, reminded me how rare it is to see a woman carrying the weight of a universal story, undefined by romantic attachment"* [S6, p. 2]. Similarly, in 2017 tweets about *Meet me at Dawn* by audience member Natalie Ibu (now Artistic Director of Northern Stage Theatre, Newcastle) stated it was *"the first time – as a queer black woman – I get to see myself in a play where 'the drama' is completely unrelated to my identity. Feels so extraordinary a comment to make that as I type it, I'm desperately thinking back over all the plays I've seen in my 33.75 years. Nope. Today is the first."* [S6, p. 3].

Her influence on debate was particularly pronounced in Turkish audiences' and playwrights' responses to the events accompanying *Meet me at Dawn's* Istanbul premiere (2017-18). In the context of a ban on LGBT drama and film in Turkey, the production became the centre of debate about how women are represented onstage and in the media. Three public panels – at which Harris spoke and which were attended by psychiatrists, feminist/LGBT activists, students and the public – sold out within 48 hours and were attended by more than 200 people and watched by more than 600 online; the premiere and panels were described by the Director of Sabanci University's Gender and Women's Studies Centre as a *"unique and valuable space"* inspiring discussion of sexuality, gender and trauma [S7, p. 2]. Harris's workshops with and two-year mentoring of 13 people (young Turkish, Kurdish and Iranian playwrights) led to 10 of the 13 writing their debut plays on *"gender-informed subject matters"* [S1, pp. 3-4]; the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* described them as *"a new wave of playwrights who will make a difference"* [S1, p. 4]. Harris's collaboration with one playwright, who became her Turkish translator, led to his appointment as Affiliate Artist at [UNESCO RILA](#) (Refugee Integration Through Arts). He writes: *"Harris and her works have produced a new generation of playwrights; created employment for more than 30 professionals (more than half of them are women) [...]; brought national and international awards and nominations; and started a huge public discussion around*



*gender politics of theatre*. [Harris's work] *'has created an unparalleled ripple effect on our lives, community and on our craft'* [and] *'has become a barometer of sexual politics of representation'*. [S1, pp. 6-7].

### **3. Harris's work leaves a creative legacy for playwrights, directors, actors and audiences.**

Harris's plays have: won the Berwin Lee award for best play in the USA/UK; won the Critics' Award for Best New Play, Scotland, once and been short-listed twice; been shortlisted for the Susan Smith Blackburn award; and won a Herald Angel award. In February 2019, distinguished theatre critic Joyce McMillan described Harris as "[the leading Scottish playwright and director](#)", commending her "*international reach*" and noting she "*had three different plays opening across Europe in a single weekend*". Harris's works are now established in the British theatrical canon, available to diverse current and future readers and audiences, as is apparent in: at least 17 productions of these 6 plays in the UK and internationally to 31 December 2020; their numerous awards and critical success; and their influence on school and University teaching in the UK and Turkey. An acting edition of *This Restless House* is published for amateur, student and school performances; 644 people (students) from 30 schools attended *The Duchess* in Glasgow in 2019 and school workshops sold out [S8, p. 1]; and Harris's Turkish translator was invited to re-gender the drama curriculum at Istanbul Bilgi University. He included three plays by Harris as well as work by other women and queer dramatists, for which he was commended as Best Lecturer by the University's Human Rights MA programme director [S1, p. 6]. Recognition of the importance of Harris's creative work led to her elevation to [Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh](#) in 2018.

Several female playwrights attest that Harris's creation and re-creation of roles for women has profoundly influenced the types of stories they tell. The award-winning Scottish playwright [Stef Smith](#) writes, "*Watching Meet Me at Dawn has inspired me to continue on my own journey to ensure I am both writing and supporting work that furthers different, complex, multifaceted representations of woman and other identities / communities who are often underserved by the canon of British playwrighting*" [S9, p.1]. Palestinian-Irish playwright [Hannah Khalil](#) writes: "*the fact that Zinnie's plays are being programmed on big stages is vitally important. It makes other female writers know the effort is worthwhile and the fight winnable*" [S9, p. 2]. And award-winning Scottish playwright [Frances Poet](#) writes: "*As a playwright, Zinnie's influence reigns large [...] in Zinnie we have a playwright building worlds around extraordinary female protagonists, offering [...] unrivalled roles that reframe what is possible for women on the stage*" [S9, p. 3].

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

[S1] Screenshot from BBC Arts website, 16 March 2015; e-mail from Marketing Officer, Royal Court Theatre, 4 March 2019; letter from UNESCO RILA Affiliate Artist, 22 January 2020.

[S2] Screenshots from Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) Annual Review 2017; screenshot from Wikipedia entry on EIF; e-mail from Artists Coordinator of EIF, 12 January 2021.

[S3] E-mail from Artistic Director of Citizens Theatre, 22 July 2019.

[S4] Screenshot of *Guardian* website, 24 April 2018.

[S5] E-mail from actor Kirsty Stewart, 6 August 2019; screenshot of IOL website, 27 March 2018; screenshot of SABC interview with actor Pamela Nomvete, 12 March 2018.

[S6] Article in 2016 theatre programme by *Guardian's* Chief Culture Writer; screenshot of audience comments on Twitter about *Meet me at Dawn*, 27 August 2017.

[S7] Statement from Director, Gender and Women's Studies Centre of Excellence, Sabanci University, 21 June 2018.

[S8] E-mail from Marketing Officer, Citizens Theatre, 24 September 2019.

[S9] E-mail from Stef Smith, 7 June 2018; e-mail from Hannah Khalil, 17 June 2019; e-mail from Frances Poet, 5 July 2019.