

**ON HER SHOULDERS** is supported largely through tax-deductible gifts from individual supporters and the generous volunteer and in-kind contributions of the producing team (individuals and institutions). **Cash donations are gratefully accepted at the box office to help defray the cost of artist stipends and refreshments.**

FOR THE 2014-15 Series, we are again asking friends and colleagues to send a check or visit PayPal to make a more substantial donation that will allow us to continue this vital work! Checks should be made payable to New Perspectives Theatre Company noting OHS as the beneficiary, and mailed to: New Perspectives Theatre Company, 456 West 37th Street, New York, NY 10018.

Credit Card donations may be made at  
<http://www.nptnyc.org/programs/ONHERSHOULDERS.htm>

### THE 2015 SERIES

DATE	PLAY	AUTHOR	DIRECTOR	DRAMATURG
2/18/15	The Suffrage Plays	various	Melissa Attebery	Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, Ph. D.
4/15/15	<i>Spunk</i> (1926)	Zora Neale Hurston	Aneesha Kudtarkar	Sadah "Espii" Proctor
9/23/15	<i>Overtones</i> (1913) & <i>Fourteen</i> (1920)	Alice Erya Gerstenberg	Melissa Attebery	Mari Lyn Henry
12/4/15	TBD	Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz	Melody Brooks	TBD

### About the New School for Drama

The creative home for the future of performing arts. **Agile. Engaged. Innovative. Multi-disciplinary.** The New School for Drama is home to a dynamic group of young directors, writers, actors, creative technologists, and award-winning faculty. With a core belief in rigorous creativity and collaborative learning, our programs embrace civic awareness across performance disciplines to create work imbued with professionalism, imagination and social context. For more information, please visit [www.newschool.edu/drama](http://www.newschool.edu/drama)

**The Play in Context**, the dramaturgical and scholarly presentation component for all of the readings, is sponsored in part by the League of Professional Theatre Women, a not-for-profit organization promoting visibility and increasing opportunities for women in theatre since 1982. [www.theatrewomen.org](http://www.theatrewomen.org)



**ON HER SHOULDERS**  
 New Perspectives Theatre Company  
 and The New School for Drama  
 present

## ***"Women on the Verge"*** *Overtones* (1913) and *Fourteen* (1920) by Alice Erya Gerstenberg



Directed by Melissa Attebery  
 Dramaturgy by Mari Lyn Henry  
 Assistant Director, India Van Camp

Wednesday, September 23, 2015  
**The New School**  
 Wollman Hall, 65 West 11th Street  
 New York, New York



**The New School for  
 Drama**

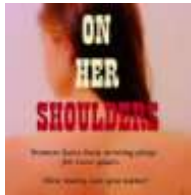
## Women have been writing plays and contributing to the Western Theatrical Canon for 1,000 years.

### How many of the plays or playwrights can you name?

Total plays by women produced in commercial and regional theatres in the U.S. have remained below 20% for most of the 20th Century and now into the 21st. Yet many of these plays have been the most successful of their time, earning greater awards and box office income than their male counterparts.

At the first reading of **ON HER SHOULDERS** in May 2013, we surveyed the audience about their knowledge of the play and/or the playwright. Given that our audience is generally composed of theatre practitioners and those with an interest in women in theatre, the numbers were still shocking: only 40% had ever heard of Rachel Crothers; just 21% had read any of her plays, and only 7% had seen a production of one of them.

### With a general audience, we can imagine that these numbers would be even worse!



The goal of **ON HER SHOULDERS** is to remedy this situation. By presenting staged readings of plays from across the spectrum of time and place, with contemporary dramaturges adapting them for modern audiences, we are making it impossible to deny or ignore the great tradition and value of women's contribution to the theatrical canon.

Through our reading series we intend to motivate producers and directors to champion and produce these brilliant plays in New York and regionally, and to incite audiences to demand to see them.

In making history visible, we also shine the light on today's women playwrights and see their work as part of a continuum a thousand years long. They stand on the shoulders of giants--and in restoring our foremothers to their rightful place, we elevate all women playwrights.



**ON HER SHOULDERS** is also aligned with the goals and projects of 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists. This grassroots initiative was launched in August 2009 to work toward 50% representation for women playwrights and directors by the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage in the U.S.

**NEW PERSPECTIVES THEATRE COMPANY (NPTC)** is an award-winning, multi-racial company performing in the Theatre District and in communities throughout New York City. Our mission is to develop and produce new plays and playwrights, especially women and people of color, to present classic plays in a style that addresses contemporary issues, and to extend the benefits of theatre to young people and communities in need. **Our aim is not to exclude, but to cast a wider net.** Now in its 25<sup>th</sup> season, notable NPTC productions have included *Richard III*, starring Austin Pendleton; *Exhibit #9* by Tracy Scott Wilson (1999 Audeco Award); *Jihad* by Ann Chamberlain (OOBR Award for Best Production); *The Taming of the Shrew* (OOBR Award for Best Production), *Admissions* by Tony Velella (10 Best Plays Backstage); the U.S. premiere of *Visit* by renowned Argentinean playwright Ricardo Monti; and the New York Premieres of Vaclav Havel's *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, OBIE-Winner Stephanie Berry's *The Shaneequa Chronicles* (produced with Blackberry Productions), *Lemon Meringue Façade* by Ted Lange, and *MOTHER OF GOD!* by Michele Miller (Finalist, Princess Grace Foundation Award). [www.nptnyc.org](http://www.nptnyc.org)

But Gerstenberg was, in fact, known nationwide on the Vaudeville circuit, the most popular form of indigenous entertainment between 1893 and 1925. One-act plays lent dignity to the bill of entertainment and she had many of them. *Overtones* was presented at Chicago's Palace Theatre by Martin Beck, founder of the Orpheum Circuit. *The Pot Boiler* was presented not only in Vaudeville, but in a trench in France, in Hawaii, as well as little theatres in Chicago, New York, San Francisco and Hollywood. Her inventive last line for this modern Restoration farce cleverly turns the lens upon herself. When the character of the playwright doesn't know how to end his absurd playlet. "I don't know who shoots!" he shrieks (in Vaudeville the ingénue traditionally asked, "Who Shoots?") Gerstenberg's players exclaim in disgust, "Oh, shoot the author!"

*Fourteen* is a one-act social satire originally performed at Maitland's Theatre in San Francisco in 1919 and published in the February 1920 issue of *The Drama* magazine, in which J. Vandervoort Sloan described Gerstenberg as "a progressive young playwright, possibly the best-known and most widely be-played by amateur groups in America" and *Fourteen* as belonging "in the 'A' class of her plays". A reviewer for the American Library Association called it an "exemplary social farce" and it continues to be produced to this day. The character of Mrs. Pringle foreshadows Hyacinth Bouquet in the British sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances* and Billie Burke's social climbing hostess in *Dinner At Eight* (I suspect Edna Ferber had seen a performance of *Fourteen*.)



Gerstenberg's Midwest origins put her in association not only with Iowa's Susan Glaspell, but also Wisconsin's Zona Gale and Missouri's Zoe Akins. She was dedicated to the Chicago Little Theatre movement and was passionately invested in creating production opportunities for authors who remained outside of New York, serving on the board of the Society of Midland Authors. This quote in praise of the founder John M. Stahl gives a sense of that dedication, the resistance the society encountered, and Gerstenberg's frank but literary turn of phrase: "Some people were aggravated by his eagerness to make a success of this society. Most people never even try to exercise the second commandment, they are so busy looking at the outside of a fellow without taking an accompanying glance at the inner soul. I admire people who have the initiative to put something worthwhile into the world as against those who remain lumps of criticism in the path."

She embraced spiritualism and its emphasis on freedom of conscience. It became a magnet for social radicals, especially advocates of women's rights and abolition. They sought knowledge of the world beyond. Alice tackled this subject matter in her one act monologue *Beyond* about a dead woman awaiting judgment from the All Powerful.

Scholar Dorothy Chansky, author of *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, summarizes Gerstenberg's contributions as follows: "She greeted changes with a willingness to go on writing, producing, and speaking about and on behalf of women and theatre. Her life was transitional in the sense that she made, rather than resisted changes. If she was unwilling or unable to play the role of the tough rebel or to give up her financial status, she accomplished for decades the feat that was often short-lived for female playwrights of the Progressive Era. Alice the artist and Alice the woman continued to face each other in the mirror. One can imagine they were often smiling."

P.S. Glaspell's *Trifles* and Gerstenberg's *Fourteen* are going to be performed at the Anthony Hopkins Theatre in Northern Wales in December. Amazing!





## **ALICE (ERYA) GERSTENBERG (1885-1972)**

**by Mari Lyn Henry**

Descended from the House of Gerstenberg, grain merchants who founded the Chicago Board of Trade, Alice was the only child of Julia, a woman with no formal education who had had aspirations of becoming an actress and Erich, a successful businessman. She enjoyed a lifestyle available only to the very wealthy. After being enrolled at a private school in Chicago, her mother decided she should attend Bryn Mawr. Founded in 1885, Bryn Mawr was a women's liberal arts college based on Quaker values. The curriculum offered women a more progressive academic program than any others, and it prepared them for meaningful opportunities to contribute to the world so they could compete with men.

In 1908, a year after her graduation, she began writing plays professionally. *A Little World* contained four one-acts written for girls in a Chicago acting school. She also published two feminist novels which were highly successful. *Unquenched Fire* (1912) concerns Jane, a Chicago society girl who goes to New York to be an actress. She is aware of her ability to be in an emotional situation while at the same time able to watch and chart her own reactions and those of others. Jane embodies the split between woman and artist and in the end must choose between them. In her memoirs, Alice wrote of a similar ability of consciously filing serious or funny moments away for future use in her work. She was already employing the split subject in her themes.

*Overtones* (1913) her most well-known and still oft-produced one-act about the primitive vs. the cultured selves of two women, was inspired by a visit to an acquaintance from Chicago who had moved to Manhattan. The friend asked her husband twice within a few seconds whether, as he left to visit a neighbor, he was going to take the car. At this point, Alice reminisced "I heard a click at the top of my head, as if the shutter of a camera had closed and my mind said to me about her, 'I know you have an automobile, I heard you the first time.'" We are not two women sitting on this couch having tea. We are four women, each with an underlying self." Feminist objectives recur in her novels and plays and reflect her interest in the inner psyche as "a critique of a society that represses women so severely they break apart."

Two years after the publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, she was the first playwright to give Broadway an authentic glimpse into unconscious life. *Overtones* was produced by the Washington Square Players with a set designed by Lee Simonson in 1915 and performed in repertory with other short plays at the Bandbox Theatre (E. 57<sup>th</sup> St. and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave.) until May 1916. After its run there, it toured on Martin Beck's Vaudeville circuit, performed at the Palace Theatre in Chicago and in London where Lillie Langtry starred as Harriet.



**Bandbox in 1914**

Interviewed for a New York daily in 1915, she was described as a "little, blond-haired, blue-eyed schoolgirl...perched on the arm of a chair with a letter from her daddy." She was actually 30 and had just published her second novel, *The Conscience of Sarah Platt*, and was already known for her successful stage adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*.

What is easy to describe in novels, such as unrealistic distortions of space, swift transitions, long falls down holes and flying through the air, was, to say the least, challenging when compressing the action of two novels into a comprehensible play; lighting, set design, music and stage directions were daunting. In Gerstenberg's adaptation, when Alice escapes from the Red Queen the stage direction involved her jumping over "the footlights on the bridge and as the curtain falls dividing her from the crowd, she appeals to the audience to save her." This is one of the first examples of a character breaking through the proscenium and engaging in direct address to the audience in the American

theatre. One critic noted that nearly thirty playwrights had tried unsuccessfully to dramatize Carroll's stories and "it remained for Alice Gerstenberg to dramatize the book successfully as Carroll wanted it."



The story of the psychological maturing of the American drama is connected to the emergence of the Art Theatre or Little Theatre movement, which led the revolt against the hackneyed commercial theatre in New York referred to as the Great "Trite" Way. Between 1912 and 1915 Little Theatres sprang up in various parts of the country including Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Provincetown, and the Neighborhood Playhouse and Washington Square Players in New York.

Gerstenberg was a pioneer in the movement and one of the original members of the Chicago Little Theatre founded by Maurice Browne in 1912. She and Annette Washburne started the Chicago Junior League for Children in 1921. Her most significant contribution to the theatre was in being founder, producer and president of The Playwrights' Theatre of Chicago (1922-1945).<sup>1</sup>

Her plays and investment in the community embraced her concerns for fellowship, self-expression and anti-commercialism that the Little Theatre movement fought for. She believed that it was "necessary for a woman to be a human being first and a woman afterward and to learn to express her individuality with the same freedom and confidence that men do!"

But her feminism is too easily lost in critiques of her work that see only the upper-class milieus or the satirized women's behavior. While her characters like Mrs. Pringle in *Fourteen*, or Lois in *The Unseen* are often frivolous or shallow, she also wrote about women of substance like the psychic Grace in *Attuned* or Miss Ivory, the savvy ingénue in her updated restoration farce *The Pot Boiler* who outsmarts Sud, the inept playwright.

She was often urged to move to New York, but preferred to remain in Chicago tending to her supportive parents and stating, "Chicago's climate itself stimulates the "I will" spirit. We kept on striving to build for a richer soil in the arts."

Described in an early interview as a 'girl author', she rebutted with "There should be no condemning laws for women and condoning laws for men. There should be but one law for both, and that a clean, broad, uplifting, developing human law, a law of honest self-expression." She never married but chose to devote her life entirely to the theatre and to improving the lives of women, practicing what she preached most passionately and eloquently.

1. According to The Newberry Research Library, Chicago, which houses the Alice Gerstenberg papers, 1903-1971.

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## ALICE IN CHICAGOLAND

by Mari Lyn Henry

Gerstenberg's fellow Bryn Mawr alumna, producer Theresa Helburn, Class of 1909, wrote: "I smile when I think of the rather priggish morality and unsuspected conventionality with which we condemned the double standard and upheld free love with a rather humorless determination to back good causes and generally enlighten the world."

It was a restless time, values were being questioned, dozens of new schools and movements in art were erupting. Cubism was duking it out with futurism and everybody wrote free verse. The International Exhibition of Art (1913) had brought modern art to America and a new set of books had appeared including Theodore Dreiser's controversial *Sister Carrie* (1900), Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) demystifying rural America, and Ernest Poole's *The Harbor* (1915) advocating for the unionization of dock workers.



"Little Theatres", begun in Chicago in 1912 had sprung up around the country in opposition to the stifling hand of the commercial Theatre Syndicate. They began writing and producing their own plays, experimenting with new forms of storytelling, acting styles, dialogue and mise-en-scene to suit the times. The development of the Provincetown Players in 1915, led by Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook, set the standard for the passionate conviction that theatre should be a medium of serious artistic expression of important issues and not just a money-grubbing enterprise. In that same year and "because *everyone* seemed to be writing one-act plays", Lawrence Langner inaugurated informal evenings of play readings which became the Washington Square Players, named after the Boni Brothers' bookshop on Washington Square Park where the plan had been conceived. (Langner would go on to create the Theatre Guild with Helburn in 1918, which still exists today.)

In Greenwich Village, psychoanalysis was an intriguing new fad. Glaspell and Cook's play *Suppressed Desires* dealt with Freudianism in America, satirizing the effects of the principal character's obsession with psychoanalysis and her adoration of the doctor, which almost destroys her marriage. It was reported that the intellectuals would "rather 'psych' each other than eat." There was such fascination with the new lingo about the libido, the id, and the super ego that Ms. Glaspell exclaimed: "You could not buy a bun without hearing of someone's complex!"

It was in this forward moving group that Gerstenberg found her first success as a playwright. She could be labeled a Bohemian artist or a Greenwich Village feminist but labels bothered her. What she had in common with this group was probing the psyche of her characters in new forms that would express the troubled spirit of the modern woman. *Overtones* is thought to be the first American play to depart from realism and to show the unconscious self.<sup>1</sup>

Eugene O'Neill, who had undergone psychoanalysis in 1927, clearly was influenced by Gerstenberg. In *Strange Interlude* he uses "thought asides" similar to her split protagonist; others referred to them as interior monologues. Audiences were impressed; his play ran for 426 performances and won the Pulitzer. He is considered "the founder of a new dramatic form equal to the challenge of modern psychology, restoring insight into the tragic outcomes of human motives."<sup>2</sup> Today, most people have never heard of Gerstenberg.

<sup>1</sup> Sievers, W. David. *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama*. Hermitage House. 1955

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

## ON HER SHOULDERS

presents

### *Overtones (1913) and Fourteen (1920)* by Alice Erya Gerstenberg

Directed by **Melissa Attebery**†  
Dramaturgy by **Mari Lyn Henry**  
Assistant Director, **India Van Camp**,†

#### CAST

##### **Fourteen**

DUNHAM  
MRS. HORACE PRINGLE  
ELAINE

**Zoe Anastassiou**†  
**Christine Bruno**†\*  
**Chrystal Bethell**

##### **Overtones**

HARRIET  
HETTY  
MARGARET  
MAGGIE

**Natasha Yannacañedo**\*  
**Elizabeth Klein**†  
**Chrystal Bethell**  
**Zoe Anastassiou**†

†New School Graduate or Student

\* Member AEA

**Please join us after the reading for a Play in Context discussion and a glass of wine**

**MELISSA ATTEBERY** (*Director*) began in LA in series television at Paramount, Viacom and Granada Entertainment before moving to the NY stage. She assistant-directed for Tina Howe at the *24 Hour Plays on Broadway* and directed the award-winning comedy *Larry Gets the Call* by Matt Casarino, which was then featured at DaDaFest International (Liverpool). She produced *A Celebration of Women in Theatre: Miss Representation* at The Players. BA, Dramatic Art and Film Studies, UC Santa Barbara; MFA, Directing, Actors Studio Drama School. Associate Artistic Director and Resident Director, Emerging Artists Theatre; Producer, On Her Shoulders; Member, The Actors Studio Playwright/Director Workshop and League of Professional Theatre Women; Associate Member, SDC. [www.melissaattebery.com](http://www.melissaattebery.com)

**MARI LYN HENRY** (*Dramaturg*) is the founder of The Society For The Preservation of Theatrical History dedicated to forgotten artists who had a major impact on the development of the modern Theatre, especially in New York City. It brings together historical scholarship on the people, circumstances and societal forces that shaped the modern era, along with a performance element that allows the voices of these innovative and important figures to be heard again by today's audiences. She holds a Master's Degree in Theatre History from Catholic University in Washington, D.C. and is the co-author of five editions of *How To Be A Working Actor* which for over 25 years has been considered the 'bible of the biz' by industry professionals, educators and celebrities. Mari Lyn is on the Board of the League of Professional Theatre Woman, and founder and chair of LPTW's Heritage Committee.

**INDIA VAN CAMP** (*Asst. Director*) is a first-year MFA Directing student at the New School for Drama. Past directing credits include *The Maids* by Jean Genet and a self-published adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *Cask Of Amontillado*. As an assistant director, she has worked regionally at the Indiana Repertory Theatre on *The Game's Afoot* and at Theatre at the Center on *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Thanks to my fiancé Frank Paul for all the support and to my family.