

Finding the Words: Creating a Dramatic Dialogue From Other Authors' Works

By Denise Buhr

In spring 2009, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne launched a campus- and community-wide endeavor called the *Remnant Trust at IPFW*. This was a semester-long program of university courses, special events, lectures, movies, and television broadcasts, along with numerous activities for area K-12 students, all centered on an exhibition of over 50 first- and early-edition books. Most of the items came from the Remnant Trust, a collection of over 900 manuscripts, books, pamphlets, and documents on subjects related to individual liberty and human dignity. The works selected by IPFW for viewing were documents that sparked controversy and changed history.

These works were grouped into seven theme areas, one of which was Women and Power. Four of the items chosen for the exhibition were included in this theme: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women*, Plutarch's *The Virtues of Women and the Parallel Lives*, and Herman Mann's *The Female Review/Memoirs of an American Young Lady*. The last title is the story of Deborah Sampson Gannett, one of the few women known to have served in the Revolutionary War disguised as a man. It was this story that led to the writing of the play *Fighting Words: A Dialogue on "Women in Combat"*.

Because I had already written plays that had had local productions, Dr. Shari Troy, theatre faculty and another member of the

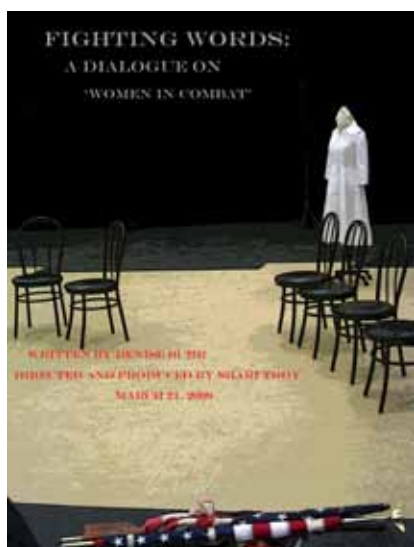
subcommittee, suggested that I write one for the main event of the theme's two weeks of activities and perhaps base it on Deborah Sampson's life. This was only a suggestion, however, and I was given free rein by the committee to choose my topic, characters, and style. Dr. Troy agreed to direct but did put some restrictions on the production. The play had to fit into the already set schedule of other theatrical productions on campus. The presentation had to be sparse. It could not

involve a great number of staff or students from the Theatre department, nor require elaborate sets, lighting, sound, or costumes, all of which would be needed for the department's own productions. It would most likely have to be a staged reading, done with texts in hand, and therefore should run no longer than an hour and fifteen minutes.

In deciding what direction to take with this play, I wanted to see what inspiration I derived from any of them. I was *not* inspired by *The Virtues of Women* (no pun intended); I discovered that Deborah Sampson's story has been

dramatized by others; and neither of the other two works seemed to lend themselves to dramatic interpretation.

So the question remained: what was to be the subject of this play? When I started to research the life of Deborah Sampson one of the most interesting facts was that, once she was discovered to be a female in disguise, she was given an honorable discharge and was eventually awarded a pension by the state of Massachusetts for her service, with



The image above was created by Bonnie Manning and shows part of the set that was used for the play.

her request supported by a letter from none other than Paul Revere. She was honored, in her time, for doing something that was controversial, completely against the rules of her society, and for which other women were punished and harassed. Why her; why not the other women? Why were other women who attempted the same thing treated so badly: ridiculed, literally drummed out of the camps, and forever held up to scorn? They, too, wanted to serve their fledgling country and the need for soldiers was great. At this point I realized that Deborah Sampson's story, while unique to the Revolutionary War, was not all that unusual just 75 years later. I had been researching topics of the Civil War for another play and had read stories of several women who joined the army of one side or the other in disguise as men. Historians suggest that perhaps as many as several *hundred* women had done this successfully. And attitudes toward these women seemed to be less strident and more accepting. What had changed? Customs, culture, society, gender roles?

At this point I began to consider whether a comparison between Deborah Sampson and women soldiers of other eras might be workable. I began to research other periods of war in our country's history – the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam, in particular, since those are the most documented conflicts. There are numerous stories of individual women serving during wartimes, many of them quite fascinating. I was tempted to choose one from each period to act as the spokeswoman for her contemporaries. But the individual stories were only a small part of what I realized I really wanted to know, and that was how attitudes toward women in the military in general, and toward women in *combat* in particular, had changed – attitudes of society, politicians, military leaders, and the women themselves. Given the current situations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the stories coming out of those conflicts concerning military women, something had apparently changed. Women now occupy high levels of command. In the images of soldiers on the evening news and in the newspapers it is sometimes hard to determine whether the figure in camouflage and body armor is male or female. Women have been wounded and killed in the fighting.

A woman in uniform and even a woman in combat is no longer such a rare and curious thing.

In researching the various time periods and conflicts, it became obvious that many people had many things to say about women in the military – some positive, some negative, some downright hostile. Authors writing on the Women's Air Service Pilots were bitter about the respect and recognition those women in World War II did *not* get. Feminists bemoaned the lack of women in the combat arms while conservative women condemned the very idea of women in the infantry. Some male leaders saw no need for women in the military while others were outspoken that without them this country could not fight and win its wars. There was no shortage of written material to draw from. For that reason and the fact that the time frame was so short, I chose not to seek out current military women or women veterans to interview. It would have been quite interesting but not feasible. I had one year from my first meeting with the Women and Power subcommittee to the date of the actual production. By the time I decided on a topic, there were about six months left to research and write the play and get a first draft to the play's director for review.

Over 130 resources (books, articles, and websites) were used for this project though there were many more consulted and deemed not useful for this particular work. Examples of those include biographies of specific women such as Emma Edmonds of the Civil War, articles on the portrayal of military women in movies like *G. I. Jane* or *Courage Under Fire*, or items that covered the same ground as others already reviewed. Not all the resources that were used are quoted in the final script, of course, especially since almost half of the original script had to be cut to fit the performance time allowed. But it was important to read as much and as widely as possible to get a sense of each era. I had the assistance of a community member who was also on the Women and Power subcommittee, Nancy McCammon-Hansen. She read and marked a number of articles and several books that I had selected. I didn't always choose the same lines she found most interesting, but her suggestions were always thought-provoking

and I appreciated her efforts and insight. It was in looking at those highlighted sections that I made the final decision on the format of the play. In searching for what others had to say about women in the military, I realized that I could not say it any better. So I wove together the words written by the authors and words of people the authors quoted to create a dialogue. The only words in the script that are my own are lines used to create a transition from one topic to another and they are so noted. In choosing the lines I tried to select a balance between all the various viewpoints and it was important that those viewpoints be truly represented and not misread or misunderstood because they were no longer in their original context. The purpose of this play was not to push forward a particular opinion but to give the audience a variety of opinions to think about. As a veteran of the United States Army, I certainly have my own point of view regarding women in the military, but this play was never to be a bully pulpit.

Now that all the lines were gathered, it was time to put them into some order. From the Revolutionary War to Vietnam, an historical sequence was the most logical. The periods from Vietnam to the Gulf War and then from the Gulf War to Iraq lent themselves more to a topical order. Most of the conflicts in that thirty year period have been generally short in duration and the issues that were raised regarding women in the military were as prevalent in peacetime as in war. This part of the script covered topics such as differences in physical conditioning requirements for men and women, sexual harassment, and definitions of "combat."

The lines were divided among eleven readers, one acting as the playwright. The other ten were not named except by gender and number, four men and six women. They were assigned to the lines based on the following:

- Male 1 Pro-women in the military/ combat
- Male 2 Anti-women in the military/ combat
- Male 3 Generally on the pro side; neutral lines that are historical or factual information

- Male 4 Generally on the anti side; also neutral lines
- Females 1, 2, & 3 The voices of women who served, especially in WWII and Vietnam; also used where there is a series of lines related to the same topic
- Female 4 Neutral historical or factual lines
- Female 5 Pro-women in the military/combat
- Female 6 Anti-women in the military/combat

These designations are fluid; the lines themselves do not always fit one of those descriptions. The nature of the play sometimes forced a line to be assigned to a reader other than the obvious choice because that person spoke the preceding line. But in general, using the same voice for comments similar in tone made it easier for the audience to follow the ebb and flow of the play. Here is a sample from the script:

- Male 3: Patriotic reasons for enlistment dominated.
- Female 1: My husband. . .
- Female 2: . . . brother. . .
- Female 3: . . . fiancé was killed at Pearl Harbor. . .
- Female 2: . . . at Java Sea. . .
- Female 1: . . . at Salerno.
- Female 3: My uncle is a prisoner of war.
- Female 1: I want to get this war over as quickly as possible.
- Female 2: In civilian life I didn't feel I was doing enough.
- Female 3: I just felt if I came into the Women's

Army Auxiliary Corps I would be doing more.
Playwright: There were personal reasons as well.

Female 1: I didn't want to live with my aunt any longer.

Female 2: I had been working at a desk for 5 years and I thought I would like to get something that would give me a chance to be outdoors more.

Female 3: I was so sick and tired of that typewriter I couldn't stand it any longer.

Male 4: That woman probably erred in joining the Army, which at that time wanted women to replace the ham-handed male typists who were needed in combat units.

In a few instances, the originator of a particular line was identified within the script and therefore to the audience. These were mostly political leaders whose names or positions I thought would be familiar, such as in these lines:

Male 1: If a woman wants to volunteer for combat, should she be treated any differently than a man? Senator Birch Bayh, Democrat, Indiana.

Male 2: Indeed she should be! Women have no place on the battlefield! Senator Sam Ervin, Democrat, North Carolina.

We used two additional readers to record three voice-overs, two at the beginning and one at the end that related to the story of Deborah Sampson: the proclamation from the Massachusetts legislature granting her a pension, a portion of the speech she gave on the lecture circuit after her biography was published, and part of the letter from Paul Revere written on her behalf.

The work was performed as a staged reading on March 21, 2009. The director and the production staff enhanced the presentation by including elements to engage the audience visually. The readers' chairs were placed in four groups rather than a single line. The stage was set with dress forms clothed in military uniforms of various periods, and other prop pieces such as combat boots, rifles, and flags; and a screen was placed behind the readers on which images appropriate to the text were projected. Some sound and light effects were also included in the production. Approximately 75 people attended the

performance and many stayed for a question-and-answer session after the reading. It was a challenging project and an interesting learning experience that ended with a work that was well received. I am very grateful to all the people who were involved in its creation, not the least being the authors whose writings gave me the words to share.

Author

Denise Buhr
Reference and Information
Services Librarian
Indiana University-Purdue
University Fort Wayne
Helmke Library, Room 161
2101 East Coliseum Blvd.
Fort Wayne, IN 46805
(260) 481-5759
buhrd@ipfw.edu

Denise Buhr served three years in the United States Army. It

was during this time, she decided she wanted to be a librarian and, after her discharge, attended Indiana University, Bloomington, where she received both her B.A. in English and her Master's in Library Science. She is the liaison librarian to Communications and Visual and Performing Arts and the interim archivist at IPFW and the author of a number of one-act plays, including *Her Women Were Called To Gather*, a play about midwifery commissioned by Sophia's Portico in Fort Wayne.



Denise, as the docent for the Remnant Trust exhibition, is holding the copy of The Female Review/Memoirs of an American Young Lady by Herman Mann. Photo taken by Elmer Denman, IPFW.