



[Image from the Grand Theatre, Blackpool]

## A Playgoer's Companion

"Regarded as little better than whores by their contemporaries, the gut girls are...a boisterous, beer-swilling, strong-minded bunch, handy with a knife both in the gutting shed and outside it, defiantly independent in attitude and scornful of the illusion of male supremacy." - *Time Out*, London

## Sarah Daniels

Sarah Daniels was born on November 21, 1957 in London, England. Her first play, at the age of 23, came almost by chance. Bored by the job she had, she responded to an advertisement in *Time Out*, the magazine of the Royal Court Theatre in London, requesting manuscripts from new writers. Encouraged by the Royal Court literary manager's positive response to the play she submitted, she quickly developed several more. Her first two productions were staged in the summer of 1981. *Penumbra* was produced at the University Drama Studio at the University of Sheffield, where she was writer in residence in the English literature department. *Ripen Our Darkness* was produced at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs.

Daniels was influenced by radical feminist and writer Andrea Dworkin. Facing both harsh criticism and glowing reviews, her work has been called the "venom-spitting virago of radical feminist theatre"; she has also been referred to as "man-hating," "savage," and "wrathful," as well as "a spirited, anarchically funny, angry young writer." In addition to writing for the stage, Daniels also has written for radio and television, including the popular BBC series *Grange Hill* and *Eastenders*. She was writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre in 1984 and has been a visiting lecturer at universities both in Britain and abroad. Her plays have been produced in Japan, Australia, Denmark, Canada, Germany, and Ireland. [Adapted from the *Dictionary of National Biography* and *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*]

"Feminism is now, like a panty-girdle, a very embarrassing word. Once seen as liberating, it is now considered to be restrictive, passé, and undesirable to wear. I didn't set out to further the cause of Feminism. However, I am proud some of my plays have added to its influence." -- Sarah Daniels

## Some context

In 1869 the British government introduced the Cattle Diseases Prevention Act. It stated that all imported animals had to be slaughtered upon their arrival at the dockyard as opposed to being sent inland. This was done in order to prevent the spread of disease from foreign countries into England through the imported livestock. It was because of this Act that over 500 women were able to find employment in the slaughterhouses. Pens for 4,000 cattle and 12,000 sheep spanned over twenty-three acres at the Deptford Dockyards, which became a dominant cattle market in Europe. The "gut girls," meanwhile, achieved local renown for their heavy drinking, gaudy hats, and colourful language.



The market flourished from the mid-1800s until the beginning of the twentieth century, when advances in technology decreased the need for manual labour in the slaughterhouses. The market closed in 1913. The Dockyards were used as a supply depot in World War I and II before being basically abandoned.

*The Gut Girls* was first staged in 1988 at the South East London venue The Albany Empire. Since then it has been performed in numerous venues around the world. Perhaps the most notable production was at the Deptford Dockyards [left] from June



20-July 8, 2002, in one of the actual gutting sheds used by the real-life "gut girls." It was described as a play "to be recommended although it is not for vegetarians." [Greater London Archaeology Society Web site]

## The Play

"The gut girls are brash, foul-mouthed, beer-swilling cockneys, mostly from desperate economic straits and dangerous pasts, but full of pride as working girls." -- Robi Polgar, *The Austin Chronicle*

In turn-of-the-century working-class England, a select group of women have managed to shed the constraints of their male-dominated society to become financially independent. They spend their days in the Deptford dockyards, exercising their skill with the blade on livestock fresh from the ships, and their nights in the Deptford pubs, carousing with fellow members of the workforce. Enter Lady Helena, a posh and proper Englishwoman determined to transform the "gut girls" into ladies with respectable occupations. What follows is a fatal clash of changing technology, societal expectations, and good intentions that leaves the girls facing the prospects of prison, marriage, life on the street, or assimilation into "polite society."

This document was researched by

### **The Gut Girls Task Force:**

Ryan Hebert, Jessica Davidson, William McKinley, Peter Morrison, and Whitney Slipp

### **and assembled and edited by the Editorial Team:**

Lieneke den Otter, Iya Downey, Meghan Jagoe, Brooke McGovern, Mare Spence, and Russ Hunt

### **English 2223: The Page and the Stage**

St. Thomas University

visit our Web site, at

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230910>