

# THE GUT GIRLS



[images from a review in *The Tab*, London]

**by Sarah Daniels**  
**a Playgoer's Companion**

**Sarah Daniels** (born 1957) is a British dramatist. She has been a prolific and highly successful writer since her first performed play was given a production at the Royal Court in 1981. Sarah Daniels' playwriting career first took off after she was able to spend a year as the writer-in-residence of Sheffield University's English department. Her plays have appeared at many venues, including the National Theatre, the Battersea Arts Centre and the Crucible, the Royal Court and the National Theatre, and she has also been a member of the board of directors for Clean Break Theatre. She has also written episodes of the soap operas *Grange Hill*, *EastEnders* and *Holby City*.

Her plays have often drawn attention for their feminist perspectives. In plays such as *Byrthrite* and *Gut Girls* she aimed at telling the story of women we rarely address when looking at history. It's not all serious issues and messages; she has strewn humour throughout her plays. The humor is a point of contention, however, as many critics fail to notice or greatly appreciate the kind of humor she presents. It has been contended that those that do not enjoy the humor are almost all men.

*The Gut Girls* was commissioned by Teddy Kiendl, a director at the Albany Empire theater in Deptford, to “draw working-class Londoners to theatre.” The guidelines Kiendl set down were to due tell the story of the trials of the Girls working in the gutting shed, and to the “philanthropic efforts” of the Duchess of Albany. One consequence of this is that the play is as close to a true story as theatre usually gets. [adapted from Pamela Bakker, “*Gut Girls*,” in *A Critical Analysis of the Plays of Sarah Daniels* (1996)]

“ . . . Daniels capitalizes on the gut girls' reputation for camaraderie and exuberance in order to highlight . . . the importance of laughter and humour as mechanisms of survival and retaliation for women. Finally, Kiendl's concern for the play to appeal to working-class people by foregrounding an aspect of their common history is very much in accordance with Daniels' concern throughout her writing career to bring to the stage the voices of those traditionally silenced in the theatre.”

– Pamela Bakker

## The Gutting Sheds of Deptford

Deptford is a district of south east London, England, on the south bank of the River Thames. It is named after a ford of the River Ravensbourne, and from the mid 16th to the late 19th century was home to Deptford Dockyard, the first of the Royal Navy Dockyards. 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. The purpose of the act was to prevent the spread of disease from foreign countries into England through imported livestock. From 1871 until the First World War it was the City of London Corporation's Foreign Cattle Market. The act also enabled the employment of over 500 women in the slaughterhouses at the Deptford Dockyards in 1871.



*Deptford Dockyard*, by Joseph Farrington

The cattle market at the dockyards boomed for over 30 years until its eventual decline in 1907. In 1912 *The Times* reported that over 4 million head of live cattle, and sheep, had been landed. Following its closure, it became an army supply depot during both the Second and First World Wars. The dockyard is now abandoned; however, during its heyday the "gut girls" achieved local renown for their heavy drinking, gaudy hats, and colourful language. [adapted from Wikipedia]

## Producing the play

*The Gut Girls* premiered in 1988 at the Albany Empire Theatre in London. The production has been staged with both complex and minimalist sets; according to footnotes in its script, the initial stagings of the play were often held in disused gutting sheds. As time passed, however, the complexity of the productions' settings began to shift so as to accommodate the Victorian-era themes in the play. [adapted from Sarah Daniels' production notes for *The Gut Girls*]



*The Gut Girls* centres around a group of women who work in the slaughter sheds. They are vulgar, strong, and care very little for their physical appearance. In the society of the setting they are looked down on and viewed as little better than whores. A gentlewoman sets up an after-work club for them to attend with the agenda of assimilating them into the society and turning them into ladies, much to their chagrin. Over the course of the story we find out that the women are being laid off, and that

they must make the transition into "ladies" if they are to get jobs after and support themselves.

**This document was researched by the *The Gut Girls*  
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English 2223: The Page and the Stage

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