

Jane Lapotaire
talking to Esmaeil Najar

Pam Gems, Jane Lapotaire, and a Phenomenon Named *Piaf*

In this interview, award-winning actress Jane Lapotaire talks about the process of developing the central role in Pam Gems's *Piaf*, for which she won the Tony Award for Best Actress in 1981. She further describes how Gems gave her the chance to play a protagonist for the first time in her career in the British male-dominated theatre of the late 1970s. Gems established herself as a major feminist playwright in the British theatre in 1976 with the production of *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi*, although it was *Piaf* that brought her international attention and acclaim. Lapotaire discusses the significance of the female mission to create protagonist roles for women in the theatre who did not previously have the opportunity to drive a play's narrative. Esmaeil Najar is a translator, director, and theatre historian. He is currently writing his doctoral dissertation at the Ohio State University on Pam Gems's life and impact on British theatre.

Key terms: feminist theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Buzz Goodbody, Tony Awards, female protagonists.

BRITISH PLAYWRIGHT Pam Gems (1925–2011) started her career late, in her forties, when she first became involved in London's fringe theatre movement. She was one of the first post-war generation of women playwrights who successfully emerged at this time and, more crucially, continued to produce work for and flourish on the modern British stage for more than four decades.

Like her contemporary Caryl Churchill Gems began her career writing for radio, and her first radio drama, *The Leg-Up*, was broadcast in 1958. In 1972, she presented her first live theatre production, *Betty's Wonderful Christmas*, at the Cockpit Theatre in London, and she continued writing, in all some fifty plays, until 2009, when she paid her farewell to the world of theatre with productions of *Winterlove* and *Despatches* at the Drill Hall.

A prolific playwright, Gems focused on the social and sexual oppressions of women, especially after the Second World War and particularly in Britain in the 1960s through the 1980s. After her breakthrough *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1976) and *Queen Christina* (1977), *Piaf* (1978) was her third major play, which helped to establish Gems as a feminist playwright. *Piaf* not only earned national acclaim

but also garnered for her and for the cast and production team international recognition.

Piaf was Gems's second play produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Prior to this was *Queen Christina* and it was followed by three more: *Camille* (1984), *The Danton Affair* (1986), and *The Blue Angel* (1991). *Piaf* was originally staged at The Other Place in 1978, directed by Howard Davies and with Jane Lapotaire in the title role of Edith Piaf. The play transferred to the company's London studio theatre, The Warehouse, in the following year.

It has received multiple revivals. Peter Hall directed Elaine Paige in the title role in 1993 and Jamie Lloyd directed Elena Roger in 2008, for which Roger won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actress in a Musical. However, it was Jane Lapotaire who first gave life to Pam Gems's *Piaf* and helped to create the characterization of the central role.

With *Piaf*, Lapotaire won the Tony Award, the Society of West End Theatre Award (now the Laurence Olivier Award), the Variety Club of Great Britain Award, and the *Plays and Players* Award for Best Actress. Lapotaire has been working in theatre, television, and film since 1965. In 1967, she joined Laurence

Olivier's National company at the Old Vic, and in 1971 she was a founding member of the Young Vic Theatre. Bristol University, the first university to offer a drama degree, the University of East Anglia, the University of Exeter, and the University of Warwick have awarded Lapotaire Honorary Doctorates for her contributions to theatre. She has been the President of the Friends of Shakespeare's Globe for twenty years, and has served as Honorary President of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre Club for two decades. She is now an Honorary Associate Artist of the Royal Shakespeare Company, of which she is duly proud.

Lapotaire has also written three books: *Out of Order: a Haphazard Journey Through One Woman's Year* (1999); *Time Out of Mind* (2003, the story of her survival from a major brain injury), and *Everybody's Daughter, Nobody's Child* (2007, originally published as *Grace and Favour*). The following interview was conducted in her London home in the summer of 2015. It is part of a larger study of Pam Gems's life, work, and influence on the British stage.

ESMAEIL NAJAR

Esmail Najar *Jane, I am very glad to see you are back on stage after a thirteen-year gap. Fortunately, you recovered from your major brain haemorrhage?*

Jane Lapotaire It was an aneurysm in the middle cerebral artery, and fortunately I was in France, and the French have some of the best brain surgeons in the world. Completely, miraculously they saved my life. They didn't think I'd pull through. I had no idea what was going on. I was teaching at the Ecole Internationale and I thought, my goodness, I am going to faint. I had never fainted in my life. And suddenly the floor started moving around and the next thing I knew I could hear somebody shouting, 'My head, my head.' And I knew I was in an ambulance in Paris because I could feel it going over the cobbles. I spent a month in intensive care. I am a very lucky lady. But it's taken me thirteen years to get to this stage.

Thank God for having you back. Jane, do you remember your first encounter with Pam Gems? Where did you first meet her?

Well, I didn't meet Pam when I first came across her work, in a one-act play about Guinevere and Arthur which I thought was absolutely wonderful. It was a real feminist attack on Guinevere's behalf about why she is being turned into this kind of doll queen as if she has to be decorated and prettified to emphasize Arthur's prowess and his power as a king. I badly wanted to do it and somehow, and I can't remember how, I wrote to Pam and said, 'Please turn it into a full-length play.' 'Oh darling,' she said. 'I don't think I can, I've wanted to, you know, extend it but it never really worked out.' So it was a difficult piece to get done. It never happened, but I just loved it.

When the chance came to be interviewed to play Piaf, I jumped at it. I got to know Pam, I suppose, as we began to run the play quite late in rehearsals. I had asked for her not to be at rehearsals originally because I was unable to align the 'cockney' that the role was written in with the little I knew about Parisian slang and Piaf's essential Frenchness. She must have come to some dress rehearsals and the warmth that is in the play about this little tramp who had this amazing voice and refused to be packaged by male producers in a titillating way was very evident the minute Pam walked into the room. Here was a woman who was huge in her generosity, utterly committed in her feminism, and loyal to her working-class understanding.

What was the rehearsal process like for Piaf? Did it move smoothly?

I'd read the script, and there were originally thirty-six songs in it! [*She laughs.*] Well, I mean Patti LuPone couldn't sing thirty-six songs and I am not a singer, but I went and interviewed with Howard Davies, the director, and that all went fine. I said: 'Look, I am not French-speaking by birth!' My stepfather Lapotaire (I took his name) was a Parisian and, thank God, he was still alive then because he helped me to understand



some of the Parisian slang that is in a lot of the songs that Piaf sings early on in the play. Of course, for me, the big terror was singing. I don't sing except in the bath. One day we were rehearsing in Stratford at the Methodist Church Hall, up the road from the theatre, and I said to Zoë Wanamaker: 'Hey, the ladies' lavatory sounds a really good place to sing! The acoustics are amazing.' So she went back to the rehearsal room and said to Howard, 'Okay, forget doing it at The Other Place, we are doing it in the ladies' loo in the Methodist Church Hall.' [*She laughs.*]

Singing was always a total dread for me. I took singing lessons for six months before we started the play because I thought, 'I've got to know these songs inside out, so I feel confident.' Well, I would never feel confident about these songs, I would go, 'Text, text, text, oh we're getting near songs, oh God, I've got to sing, sing, sing. Thank God that's over, back to the text.' I had to learn how to manage my voice in a very different way to just speaking the play.

Piaf speaks English in Pam's version. How did you make this work?

I am glad that I didn't meet Pam for quite a long time, because it was very hard for me to

think of Piaf speaking English! And also to think of Piaf speaking English with a cockney accent. [*She laughs.*] I fumed and boiled and raged inside, because the minute I realized I had to talk like that [*she speaks with cockney accent*], my French knowledge of Piaf was obliterated. I had read every book that had been written about her; I went to the British Film Institute to see all the newsreels. I spent a whole day at the BFI looking at every film that she had made, every bit of newsreel that they had of her, and in no small way I began to loathe the woman who had written this play because every time I opened my mouth, all the 'Frenchness' about Piaf disappeared.

I said to Howard one day, 'Please, can I just play it straight for today? Please just let me play it in my own way, you know, middle of the road, flat' – what they call now RP, 'received pronunciation', which they didn't call it in my day at drama school; it was just the way everyone aspired to speak then. This was the way everybody talked. Of course, Pam was right; the minute I gave Piaf a middle-of-the-road, middle-class English accent, Piaf died a death. She wasn't this girl who'd been born on a pavement to a prostitute, whose father was a juggler. She now became a member of the English middle

class. And I said, 'Okay, Pam, you're right.' Pam understood the roughness of Piaf. It was an extraordinary voice – an extraordinary voice coming out of this little misshapen ugly waif.

Piaf has a multidimensional character, which is very difficult to enact. How did you master this? What were some of the difficulties?

Peter Brook gave me the biggest tip about playing Piaf because, of course, she never performed in England. He saw her at the Olympia in Paris. He said there were two women: there was 'the woman who walked from the wings to the microphone, and there was the woman who sang'. And of course that was the most wonderful note for me. Because it separated the woman from the performer.

I suffered stage fright for the first time in my life. I don't mean nerves. Nerves aren't stage fright. Stage fright is when you cannot get on the stage. I locked myself in the ladies' lavatory at the first dress rehearsal because it was just such an enormous mountain range I was going to have to climb; and, terrified, I couldn't, I was paralyzed with fear and was unable to move. They banged on the door. They sent Zoë to beg me to come out. I'd never been so terrified in my life. Zoë always says I was brave, but she forgets the time I shut myself in the ladies' lavatory and wouldn't come out. I don't think I ever did a performance of that play without experiencing fear largely because of the songs, but also because it was a two-and-a-half-hour heavy drama as well as the singing, and I knew it would cost me physically, which it did.

If I am not mistaken Piaf was the first play produced by the RSC that ended up in the West End and then went to Broadway. Am I right?

Yes, absolutely. We went from The Other Place in Stratford to the RSC's studio theatre in London, which is now the Donmar Warehouse. Then we transferred again and played a straight run at Wyndham's, which was perfect because it's a small gem of a Georgian theatre; it holds about 500 people. Then we moved to the Piccadilly Theatre, which was a

nightmare for me because it is a huge barn of a place, and *Piaf* is an intimate play. The power of the play is really effective when the theatre is small.

After we played the Piccadilly, we were then approached to go to New York. I said, 'I don't want to go to New York. I really don't want to go to New York. I can only play this play in repertoire with nights off. If you make me play it all the time, it will kill me.' It's like the Himalayas and I am not a professional singer. So I had to fight every step of the way to negotiate a schedule that would not make me fall at the first post. Eventually, after a lot of haggling, I got it down to seven performances, not eight. But, even then, it was a struggle. I am an actor not a singer. No singer does seven performances, but the one thing that got me through it was that Pam had chosen initially (and then Howard the director had selected) songs that were narratives, so I could approach them as an actor. The songs told a story. I could tell the story and not worry about what I sounded like.

Was it different playing Piaf in the United States?

It was much more difficult playing *Piaf* in America, because they don't understand the concept of a drama with songs. *Piaf* wasn't a musical; the songs were chosen as a kind of contrapuntal emphasis to the dialogue, or she'd sing – she would sing about beautiful love: 'La Vie en Rose', you know, love with rose-coloured spectacles, and then she'd shoot up! We added 'La Vie en Rose' in New York so that American audiences could identify her.

What a role, what a wonderful role, the best role I had in my entire life. But it cost physically. I lost the use of my arm for a year; in fact, I had to play the last month of *Piaf* with my right arm on my hip and only gesture with my left hand. Doing the drug withdrawal fit seven times a week split the nerves in my right shoulder blade. My right arm became useless. So when we gestured to the accordionist, the double bassist, and the pianist, I had to do *that*. [*She shows how she moved her right hand with the help of her left one.*] And all the company at the curtain call did that as well. [*She laughs.*]



Jane Lapotaire in the original RSC production of *Piaf* at The Other Place, 1978. Top left: with Malcolm Story. Bottom left: with Zoë Wanamaker as Toine. Bottom right: with Bill Buffery. Photos: Joe Cocks.

Usually I sang my first song to the sound of seats banging as all the blue-rinsed, white-haired and fur-coated ladies from New Jersey left. Because, as you know, the opening line of the play – at the end of her life when she is so drunk and so high on morphine that she could hardly walk and the manager of the

theatre tries to get her off – was, ‘Get your fucking hands off me. I ain’t done nothing yet.’ And you could hear the gasps. As you know, I love America, and I’ve had some of my happiest times there, teaching at Washington University, but scratch an American and they’re very, very prudish underneath.

For instance, I was interviewed about the 'urination scene' and I sent up a few journalists, saying, 'Oh, the scene where I pee on the floor, like the Piaf did?' Papa Leplee, the owner of the nightclub where she first sang, invited her to his table and not realizing after having eaten the fish – whatever it was – that you wash your hands with the water that's got lemon in it, she drank it; they laughed at her. She said to the waiter, 'You think that's funny, watch this,' and she peed on the floor.

I used to tell journalists, 'Well, at four o'clock I have a litre of water and [*talking while laughing*] at quarter to five I drink a pint of milk and then, at quarter to seven, I have three Coca-Colas. Just so that you know at ten past eight it means I can pee on the floor.' I said, 'It's a tube with a rubber bowl! I press on it, and water comes out!' In fact, sometimes it used to leak in my shoe before I got to that point. Nobody in England, in the newspapers, had ever called it the 'urination scene' – ever. Nobody had really ever paid any attention to it. But in America frequently I was asked, 'Isn't that a tad riskaroo?' And that's why I love Pam. It's pretty shocking having a woman pee on stage.

In 1981, you won the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play for Piaf.

Yes. When we did the Tony Awards show, I was at the bottom of the bill in my second-hand black dress with my smeared lipstick. (We got rid of the wig early on in dress rehearsals because the wig was doing the performance.) I just screwed up my hair with kirby grips. I was in a dressing room with Angela Lansbury and Lena Horne in floor-length sequins and fishtail gowns, while I was in this secondhand black dress from Oxfam.

I was with our beloved musical director Michael Dansicker because they'd asked me if I would sing a Piaf song at the bottom of the bill before all the proper singers sang [*She laughs.*] And I did. I had no notion – not a hope in hell, I was up against Glenda Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, and Eva Le Gallienne, who was like our Peggy Ashcroft. And I thought that, maybe, Eva Le Gallienne's bound to get it or Elizabeth Taylor. After that, my working life changed to a different level. It was, of

course, also great for the RSC. I won three of the four English awards but I wouldn't ever win the Evening Standard Awards because they knew I was too left-wing. [*She laughs.*] So, thank you, Pam, wherever you are. And of course she was over the moon that I'd won the Tony Award for her play.

Where do you see Pam's role in your success in the theatre?

Pam Gems was the best thing that ever happened to me as an actor because she gave me a chance to be a protagonist – to run the play. I had never had experience of that before, not even in Shakespeare. Rosalind is a third the size of Hamlet, and Queen Katherine of Aragon nowhere near the size of Henry VIII or Wolsey. I mean, in most Shakespeare plays women are outnumbered eight to one. In fact, in *Piaf* we had to take care of the men [*laughing*] because the boot was on the other foot, because it was a play about women. It was play about Piaf and her half-sister, about Piaf and her secretary, about Piaf and Marlene Dietrich, who used to walk her around to sober her up before she went on the stage. She always wore the crucifix that Marlene had given her.

Queen Christina (1977) and Piaf (1978), both by Pam Gems, brought women centre stage for the first time in a well-established company like the RSC, which was predominantly run by men. What were some of the challenges faced by actresses in those days?

Well, don't forget that I'd been in the company off and on since 1974. So there were several chaps in the cast of *Piaf* that I knew and who I'd already worked with. There has only ever been one woman in the directorate – Buzz Goodbody – who sadly died before I joined the company. But, of course, we did the play in the late 1970s and 1980s (1978–79 in England and 1980–81 in America). Then, by that time, feminism had even reached the shores of this little backwater called – whatever you want to call it, no wonder we have an identity crisis – the UK, Great Britain, England.

It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. Wonderful. As leading women, we were very aware. We did have public audience-paid discussions often in the Swan – one particularly with Juliet Stevenson, Fiona Shaw, and others – about the release actresses experience playing a breeches role: playing a boy playing a girl playing a boy. I think I can say quite safely that there wouldn't have been a leading actress in the RSC who wasn't a feminist.

I'll tell you a very sweet story that has nothing to do with Pam but with Gregory Doran, who is now the Artistic Director. I won an American award (blowing my trumpet) for Katherine of Aragon in Greg's production of *Henry VIII* in 1996. Perhaps my father was an American GI, but there is something in me that American audiences really respond to. (Thank you, thank you, thank you.) And Greg, whom I love dearly – he is a great director, very humane – pays as much attention to the youngsters just out of drama school as he does to the leading actors. I said, 'Greg, in this play called *Henry VIII* we have scenes titled "Henry's Chamber", "Wolsey's Party" – because as you know actors do not rehearse as Act I Scene II, scenes are given names – and the scene when Katherine of Aragon dies is called after the place where she dies, "Kimbolton"!' And he laughed and said, 'Point taken!' That was 1996, a considerable time after *Piaf*.

As a leading female actor, you have as much clout as a male leading actor, and at that level of casting you wouldn't be working with a male actor that you didn't get on with. As women in the *Piaf* cast, we went out of our way to make the men feel comfortable. Not least at The Other Place, where we had to go through the dressing room to get to the women's room; all the women were together. So there was lots of fun and games as we went through the men's dressing room. There was never any antagonism as such, but we knew that we were fighting on a very new and lonely plane. I have experienced it playing Mary Magdalene on the radio, when I actually queried something while we were recording – you know, it was a rehearsal record. One of the men said, 'Oh for good-

ness' sake just get on with it.' And I said, 'For goodness' sake, I am playing Mary Magdalene, shut up!'

As you know, Pam did not receive much attention in academia, and, as some theatre practitioners like Sue Dunderdale and Jonathan Gems argue, she was rather overlooked in the British theatre. What do you think could be the reason for this?

I think because she wasn't fashionable in any way either in her person or in her views. She was politically unfashionable. She was too left-wing, and she was too 'feminist' for the mainstream. And because she was not Sarah Kane, a twenty-eight-year-old with mental problems, rest her soul, she didn't fit neatly into any category. Also, I don't know what *Queen Christina* was like or *Stanley*, but *Piaf* required major, major editing. It was an unstructured rolling of a play. Pam herself was the first to admit it. We had no idea what style to play the thing in.

In fact, it took us virtually the whole six weeks of rehearsal to find out what style to play it in – the style discovered us rather than us discovering the style. So, anyone who worked on a Pam Gems script had to work hard, to edit – on Pam's own admission – the sprawling generosity of the text. During rehearsals, you would discover a shape to it as it was edited.

You had to take Pam as she was, and for those of us who loved her, that was a very easy thing to do because she had so much heart and so much guts and so much courage, but she didn't fit into any fashionable niche for journalists or for producers. She wrote about unfashionable things. And she wrote with – I mean, I don't know how many swearwords there are in *Piaf*, and obviously I shouldn't do any advertising, but when it was filmed (and I don't know which company filmed it) it sat on a shelf for years because they didn't have the guts to show it on American television.

Then another film company bought it and, in order to make it palatable for an American audience it had to be introduced by somebody, wearing a beret and a mac standing under a street light (the only thing that was

missing was a string of onions) saying to Americans that you must be prepared, there are going to be very, very bad words used in this play. Please! I say that, loving America and loving working in America. I can't wait to go back to New York, but it does get very prudish about things like swearwords. I suppose it was that side of Pam that made people uncomfortable. But look what she gave her actors, Lord bless her soul. Oh, she'd probably say, 'Darling, I don't want any of that nonsense. Let's have a gin and tonic.'

Pam was a force to be reckoned with, and there weren't many women playwrights around. Caryl Churchill has always held her

own, but she tends to be (and I love her work) academic. You know, on the intellectual side. Pam was all heart – all heart and all guts. When I opened the *Guardian* obituary and saw her name, I actually heard myself gasp. She was so full of life, so full of ideas, and so full of support for women who had it tough that somewhere in the back of my mind I assumed that Pam couldn't die because she'd sit down and have a damn good discussion with Death about why it was important she went on living. Actually, we were lucky we had her as long as we did. And I must just say that I am thrilled that you are writing her biography, and I wish you well with it.

The Critical Response to *Piaf at The Other Place*, 1978

'Showbiz biography is a dangerous game in the theatre,' observed Michael Coveney: but he welcomed this 'fast and snappy account of an indomitable feminine spirit', which proved 'an irresistible showcase for a spring-heeled company', and, especially, 'a devastating performance by Jane Lapotaire'.

Irving Wardle described the play as a 'feminist document showing a woman's struggle to achieve full humanity against the obstacles of her sex and birth'. And Robert Cushman noted that Piaf was only the latest in Pam Gems's line of strong female leads, following Alison Fiske's Fish and Sheila Allen's Queen Christina. But this was no 'exercise in feminist polemics'. 'Whatever points she makes,' as Wardle put it, 'are made by characters who have earned the right to make them':

In this case, by a tough young whore who gets an accidental break as a nightclub singer and goes on to the career of international fame, drugs, and car crashes with lovers half her age.

Jane Lapotaire's central performance as Piaf naturally attracted fullest comment. This was Michael Billington's description:

With her slightly skinny stork's legs, her frizzy hair, her smudged lipstick, her splay-footed bottom-jutting walk, Miss Lapotaire presents a memorable image. But, more than that, with her wide-open, barn door smile, she conveys the emotional generosity of Piaf the woman and performer. . . . Wisely, Miss Lapotaire does not attempt to impersonate Piaf, but she triumphantly re-creates her spirit.

Robert Cushman particularly admired the presentation of Piaf's gradual ageing, 'done without change of costume or make-up' and 'almost consummate'. He did feel, however, that Miss Lapotaire could not quite manage 'the gnarled

imperiousness that you hear in Piaf's records'. Irving Wardle disagreed:

Miss Lapotaire goes through the whole of Howard Davies's production in the famous little black dress, radiating a dazzling smile from a lipstick-blotched mouth. Her performance has all the unstudied directness of the Piaf legend: coarse, harsh, generous, and passionately down to earth. She also takes the plunge in a series of bilingual versions of the Piaf songs, and thrillingly brings them off.

Michael Coveney added that the supporting company was in 'fine fettle', with particularly good performances from 'Zoë Wanamaker as Piaf's prostitute buddy, Ian Charleson as her manager, Anthony Higgins as a hapless Italian pressed into service on stage and off, and Malcolm Storry popping up all over the place with almost doleful regularity'. He also liked the production style which happily accommodated all the necessary doubling and costume changes:

In an ideal studio setting, with ribbons of red neon light decorating a bare platform, and actors quick-changing in full view behind a lively duet of piano and accordion, Howard Davies's Brechtian production leaves the audience to flesh out the bare but not so brittle bones.

Irving Wardle admired the play as a 'piece of narrative',

wonderfully adept at compression and cutting corners. With no sense of haste, it telescopes years into a few seconds, for instance covering two disasters with a simultaneous drug injection and offstage car crash.

And the audience evidently loved it, too. As Robert Cushman observed, 'The cheers that were stifled' at Peter Brook's *Antony* 'rang out next night for Pam Gems's *Piaf*.'