"I never dared to write a comedy before. If nobody laughs you're stuffed, aren't you?": Lisa Evans in Conversation

By Jozefína Komporaly, De Montfort University Leicester

Lisa Evans has written extensively for the theatre, radio and television. Her stage work includes both new plays and adaptations, and has been performed apart from the UK in Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Israel and the USA. She regularly collaborates with director Gwenda Hughes and has been writer in residence at the Theatre Centre, London and Temba Theatre. She has won, among others, British Theatre Association awards and her work is published by Oberon. In this interview, she speaks about her work in general, and her play Once We Were Mothers in particular.

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Jozefína Komporaly: Your play *Once We Were Mothers* has premiered in October 2007 at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, but it was first produced in 2004 at the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Why this revival now, and what inspired the play at the time of its original production?[1]

Lisa Evans: I actually wrote the play well before it got staged, but it wasn't produced until September 2004, when it was a good point in the theatre's calendar to put it on. As you probably know, there are times of the year which are graveyards for new plays. I was commissioned by The New Vic, Stoke-on-Trent, by director Gwenda Hughes, as they'd got the funding and she and I had often worked together before. She was/is my sort of 'theatrical marriage.' The theatre wanted to commission a play that had a part for someone with a learning disability. They wanted this aspect to be part of a regular play, not a special play on disability as such. That's specifically what they got the money for, and it was at this point that they commissioned me. I then conducted research by speaking to three mothers who had teenage daughters with Down's Syndrome. The thing that most came up for them, owing to the ages of their children at the time, was how you let go. It's hard enough to let go of any teenager but with somebody with whom you have had such an intense, protective relationship, it is even harder. We also needed somebody who was the opposite of this, which became the character of Kitty, set in the fifties. There is no way she would let go, ever. And also I heard a piece on Radio 4 about the Bosnian rape camps, so I started to research that, and it seemed a good point in the triangle to actually have somebody who is a good mother, but then does the unthinkable by murdering their own child. All three stories were about

[1] Evans, Lisa. *Once We Were Mothers*. London: Oberon Books, 2004.

different views of motherhood, but also ones that many people would not have necessarily experienced; they were kind of extremes if you like: "this is how it might feel if this were to happen, imagine what it feels like."

JK: How did the current revival come about?
LE: I'd been talking to Sam Walters, the artistic director of the Orange Tree Theatre, for a while about putting something of mine on there [it's my local theatre] but he doesn't do new plays very often. I also spoke to director Auriol Smith about this, and I sent both her and Sam the play. I knew however, that you shouldn't press Sam too hard because if you do he resists. So I was treading a very cautious line. But one night I went to the theatre to see a show a friend of mine was in and half the audience were people I had worked with. I felt terribly old because everyone knew me. Then Auriol said "we are doing a women's season, why don't you speak to Sam about your play?". I did and he rang me up saying he wanted to read some adaptations of mine, as he was thinking about them for that season. I thought he probably wasn't interested in this play then, but he suddenly rang out of the blue and said "*Once We Were Mothers* is what I want to do." There was some stunned silence from me at that point as I really didn't expect him to go for it.

JK: Were you writing this play with a particular audience in mind?
LE: The audience it was commissioned for, a Stoke audience. I don't really think about a particular audience though, but I write plays with women casts and about women quite often, because there are very few plays with enough good parts for women. Also women buy the tickets. So it seems to me sensible to write about things that might interest them.

JK: Do you see *Once We Were Mothers* as a women's play or a feminist play in any sense?
LE: I hope that everything I write is informed by my politics, which is feminism, but I don't think it's a women's play. I think it's a play about motherhood, and men tend not to get found under cabbages — they also have mothers!

JK: But there is a relative lack of balance between your male and female protagonists. Isn't this a hallmark of women's theatre?
LE: I try to write more women than men in my plays just to redress the balance. If I had been born at another time, another age, maybe it wouldn't be necessary to do that. I think it is necessary at the moment, still. Also, the men are part of the story, they just don't appear on

stage. There are only a certain number of cast members that you can afford, and since the play was about mothers I thought it was more important to have them on stage. The men are crucial to their relationships, but with the exception of Tajib, they were served quite well through being reported as opposed to being actually seen on stage. They are nevertheless a presence, and a positive presence. I needed Tajib, the Bosnian husband on stage, because I needed the very happy first act to contrast with what happens afterwards. I thought it was important to show how happy Milena's sexual relationship with her husband was before the war, and, similarly, to have the same actor play her husband and the teacher she has known most of her life. How these two characters double — Tajib and the teacher (one of the men who eventually rape her) — is actually very positive.

JK: I was wondering whether the doubling was something you wrote into the script? In both productions the same actor plays the role of Tajib and the teacher, as well as the doctor, constantly switching between them throughout the play.
LE: Most of the doctors at the time these children were young were male. In fact, the actor playing Tajib, the doctor, and the teacher wasn't meant to appear in Act Two, but the director, Ellie Jones made the decision to bring him back. I am very happy with Finn Hanlon's performance, but I think having him appear in even more roles in Act 2 just looks like we haven't got enough money to pay more male actors. So I think this is kind of a political mistake. People will always ask why are there so many women in the play and so few men. It is something particularly key to all male reviewers.

JK: The programme indicates that one of the plot strands — centring on Ali and Flora's story — is set in Richmond. In the printed text there is no reference to this, the only information provided is that it is located in a contemporary setting. Was this an attempt to bring the play closer to the local community here?[2]
LE: There was not really any reference in the play to anywhere. This time it was a matter of marketing; however, some of the actresses live in the Richmond area, so the programme was accurate in this sense!

JK: What was the reception of the piece?

[2] Evans, Lisa. *Once We Were Mothers: Programme, Orange Tree Theatre*. Richmond, 2007.

LE: Amazingly good. It is quite an emotional experience and it is quite different I think from things that normally happen at the Orange Tree. Not that they don't have emotional plays, but the content and the way it's done is quite novel here for this audience. They are dealing with the play all right!

JK: As it happens, both the New Vic and the Orange Tree are theatres in the round. Did you intend the play for such a space? If so why?
LE: Well it was initially written for a theatre in the round, but I wonder if it would work as well using a pros arch space. You could do it in the traverse, or use a thrust or something, but the distance of a pros arch would be slightly problematic. The closer you are to the audience, the better for direct address.

JK: Could you talk about the artistic and dramatic choices you are opting to make in your work?
LE: This is a generalisation, but I tend to write about whatever someone is paying me to do at the time. This is what happened when Gwenda Hughes initially asked me to write *Once We Were Mothers*. It was also a reflection on her experience, because she was trying very hard to become a mother herself at the time. But then, if you read the preface you'll know she eventually adopted a little boy just before we did the play. Bizarrely every actor in the play with the exception of one — the grandmother in this and the last production — is childless and not necessarily by choice. It is part of being an actress though; it is hard to have family and be on the road. Motherhood is a common theme in my plays, so are daughters. There is the common theme of women. I guess my politics informs what and who I write about. Adaptations have been of stories that interested me and of ideas that people have thought to commission. I did a version of East Lynne, which is a horrible punitive story by the 19th century author Mrs Henry Wood about what would happen to women if they dared to have an affair: "You'll be punished horribly, shame on you!" It was written for Birmingham Rep, directed by Gwenda. We decided to have the heroine fight back and the play was written from the heroine's point of view — commenting on "why was I punished so badly for what I did." So there was a feminist slant on this topic. Similarly, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was a play about the abuse of a woman kept prisoner by a drunken husband who refused her freedom, and about how she finally breaks free and comes to a new place in her life.

JK: Can you talk about your affinities with other writers. Who if anyone is likely to provide inspiration for you?

LE: I realize more and more that I love the monologue. A writer I admire hugely, a friend of mine and somebody much funnier than I am, who also loves the monologue is Bryony Lavery. She has this theory that she can spot my plays anywhere because there is always the theme of a dead child in there. Her theme, she says, is interment, so we agreed that we could work together! I have just written a play that is being done as a rehearsed reading at the Orange Tree which is a comedy. I never dared to write a comedy before. As it is supposed to be funny, it is such a responsibility; if nobody laughs you're stuffed, aren't you? And back again to motherhood, it is set in a crumbling hospital ante-natal class. Principally, many years ago when I was having a child, the comedic value of the whole thing struck me quite forcibly.

JK: What kind of research did you conduct in preparation for writing *Once We Were Mothers*? You cover such a broad ground in the play...

LE: Firstly, the research on Ali and Flora's story was done with three women who had daughters with Down's Syndrome. This was the starting point as we wanted to have somebody who had a disability. Because of the nature of Down's Syndrome you can have people with huge ranges of ability, and also — despite this being a huge generalisation — people with Down's Syndrome often tend to be quite gregarious and enjoy performing. So when we were thinking what kind of person to come up with, someone with Down's Syndrome came to mind for those reasons. So I researched with them, and most of the stuff they told me was moulded into one family and the material was reordered. It was all their contribution, including the jokes. I wish it was mine, but it was mostly theirs; they were incredibly generous. Secondly, I did my research at the BBC and read books about the war in Bosnia. I didn't want to talk to refugees about their experience during the war. I thought they'd had enough happening to them already. What I talked about with them was their childhood, what were the customs in their country when you get married, what you eat, the festivals, all the happy times, what were schools like, things like that. I research a lot to get the confidence to write something I have not witnessed, in fact I over-research if anything. Finally, the third strand is totally fictitious. There is so much in the news today about Madeleine McCann. Around that time there was an article written by the sister of someone who went missing about what that does to the family. I think Bryony [Lavery, whom Evans greatly admires] has read it too, but luckily I hadn't read *Frozen* before writing my play or I'd accuse myself of plagiarism. The article was a very moving account of how a family gets

destroyed by absence, how it becomes obsessive. It is very hard to be a survivor in such a family. This aspect really interested me, the nature of the relationship the remaining child can have with the mother. For my play I thought that the surviving daughter was the crucial one, the one who stays behind but who is receiving some appalling mothering really.

JK: This is my favourite plot strand, I have to say. Maybe because this was the one I could least relate to personally, I was less exposed to narratives on this topic. I was also mesmerised by the performance of Esther Ruth Elliott as Kitty.
LE: The actress who played the part first time around, Hazel Maycock, came to see the Orange Tree production. It was interesting talking to her because she and Esther gave such extraordinarily different performances! They are different because the performers are different people obviously, but in the initial one the pain was completely contained, the actress was completely bound up physically. In the Richmond production, they went for the opposite; a complete expanse physically, vocally and emotionally. Both work, interestingly.

JK: The only actress who appeared in both productions is Sarah Gordy, playing Flora. And you have worked with her previously as well.
LE: I had written an episode for *Peak Practice* (long running television series, not on any more), a love story for two young people with Down's Syndrome in a sheltered house. Sarah played a part in that. Then she was in the first production at the New Vic and I kept in touch with her and her mother afterwards, so she was the obvious choice to take on the part again. She is amazing. It was very interesting for her to do the part the second time; she is older, thirty-one now, and is playing young very well (the character of Flora is a teenager!). But she had to go through a different production process this time and sort of unlearn what she had done the first time around, which for someone with Down's Syndrome can be tricky. She was of course up for the challenge, but it was hard on her. One of the things that happened in rehearsal is that when the director, Ellie Jones wanted to try things out with Sarah for Flora and then she didn't choose them for the finished production, Sarah thought she had done something wrong. She kept feeling that she failed. To try and then not have what you've done accepted is a challenging part of the process for her.

JK: How do you see this role being played by others? Do you think anyone could potentially play it?

LE: I hope so. I recently got a card from Jane, Sarah's mother saying that a friend of hers has also got a baby with Down's Syndrome. She is having speech therapy and her mother's ambition is for her to become an actress and play the roles Sarah by then would be too old for — passing on the baton, as it were. In fact, they were introduced because Paula Stockbridge, who played Milena in the first production, had a friend who knew she was about to have a baby with Down's Syndrome and who had some trepidation about it. Paula suggested she meet Jane and Sarah, to witness how they work together and how happy and joyful they are about each other. Now they are sort of role models.

JK: Can you talk about the thematic connections in your plays? And perhaps about how you explore them in the writing process?
LE: Mothers and daughters are always there. Not specifically, it's a story that somebody tells me that sets me off rather than me thinking about an issue. I did an issue thing, writing about violence against women and interviewed some people. I found it very hard, however, to then turn such material into something dramatic. The topic in this case was something which we recognise as terrible but I didn't quite know how to spin it to make that work on stage. It's too abstract. Also people's personal stories are always better than the ones you think up as a writer.

JK: Is that the way you normally write, being touched by something?
LE: Yes, then I start to read around it and quite often if it is going to work as an idea the images join up and you find it easy to do research about it. When things fall into place it's a good thing. When they don't, it's not the right project, so leave it for a while and do something else.

JK: Do you find that this helps, leaving things and then return to them at a later stage?
LE: If I can, but I mostly work to commission. My theatre work is subsidised by television anyway; living on stage work is kind of a joke. But this is what I love doing and if I could live on it, I'd do nothing else. At the moment I don't think I have anything that I am burning to write to just sit and do it though. I don't want to write just for me, I want to write something to be done on stage. Being a playwright, as far as I am concerned, means that my work does not really exist unless someone is performing it. When I got published I thought it would feel different but it isn't. Oberon now publishes pretty much what I get put on in theatres — it is nice to have the published plays out there and see that the work is not

ephemeral, it is something you can go back to, and of course that libraries and companies have easy access to — but actually it is only when work is on that really counts. It is that immediacy, that's what theatre is about.

JK: I am exploring the idea of performers as mothers/mothers as performers in relation to some other plays I am looking at, and of course we have Ali who is a dancer. I am thinking here of a multiplicity of potentially interconnected issues, such as pregnancy as spectacle (owing to the development of imaging technologies and the possibility of visualising the process of gestation), of the practice of motherhood as a demanding task constantly assessed and critiqued by outsiders — almost on the terms of a public performance, but also of some mothers simply being performers by career (actors, dancers etc).
LE: I am trying to remember why I made that choice. I think I wanted her to be something creative, and involved with something where you have a clear idea of when you fail and when you are good. It wasn't that much a connection with the idea of the artist as such. Also the phrases being "a dancer" and "my daughter dances" were in my head quite early on, together with things like being a "proper" child and a "proper" girl. I was thinking of the opposition between the "right" way to do things and the "energetic, creative" way to do things. That's what interested me. I don't like plays specifically about writers or about actors. It feels too incestuous. I would have loved to be a dancer, maybe that's what it is. One day my partner and I were driving in the car and our son suddenly asked what we both would have liked to be, something other than what we actually did. (I started out as an actor and turned into a writer, my partner is an actor.) Without stopping to think he said "archaeologist" and I went "dancer." When I was at drama school I loved dancing, I loved to be able to express myself physically.

JK: In the play you have Ali who has a career as a dancer, while the other women are mainly if not solely defined by their motherhood.
LE: Milena works in a factory, Kitty is a housewife and mother, as were most of her generation if they could afford it. You went out and worked if you had to rather than if you wanted to.

JK: Could you talk about the challenges of working in different media. You mentioned your film work already.

LE: I am doing a script for a film, that's new for me, and I am working on two adaptations one of which is with the physical theatre company Frantic Assembly. They are really nice people to work with. Their way of working is fascinating as well. I just did a visit to Broadmoor Prison for research. My framing story, apart from Frankenstein in the middle, is that I wanted to have a modern monster, a woman who kills her child. I also got commissioned for an adaptation of a Melvyn Bragg novel to be done in Keswick for their centenary. I do keep on the move as you can see, I am a moving target!

JK: Have you done any adaptations from other languages?
LE: No, I haven't. It would be fascinating, I'd love to do that, but someone would have to give me a literal translation as I don't speak other languages (just a bit of French but that isn't enough for doing a translation). That would be really interesting and challenging because of the speech patterns and rhythms. That's why I have written several plays set in America because I love the speech patterns you can get using American. That way you have so much more poetry in the language than using modern English. That, and a film, and comedy — new things. I like throwing myself off cliffs, if I haven't done it before it is a jolly good reason to have a go.

JK: What about your work for television?
LE: I have written quite a lot for television, sort of stuff everybody knows about: *Casualty*, *Holby City*, *East Enders*, *The Bill*. This work is a kind of jigsaw puzzle, doing a guest episode while having to link the plot to existing and forthcoming storylines.

JK: One final question: if you didn't have to depend on commissions what would you like to write?
LE: No idea. I don't know because I need the work to be wanted. One of the reasons of writing for commission is obviously financial, but also I am not sure that I have the confidence, without anybody else saying that this would be a good idea, to necessarily think it is worth doing. That's why I work with other people all the time. I hate being in the attic on my own. I talk to directors about what to write next. Quite often with Gwenda, for instance, we talk and she suggests "how about writing something about this." That's how it starts. I would be in trouble if I didn't have interest from somebody else. Except I have just rewritten a comedy which is uncommissioned, just so I could get it right. So I don't think I know what this new piece would be...perhaps something with dance in it! For me writing is a very

collaborative process, I get my mates involved, I ask my son to listen as I try ideas out with him. I know there are other writers who just shut themselves away for a while, but I don't work like that. I change quite a bit in the process of writing and during rehearsals, sometimes structurally, sometimes by editing, and very often it is the end that changes for some reason. In the case of *Once We Were Mothers* we talked about how to end it for quite a while. I don't remember the details we went through now, but we wanted to have a positive ending, bringing together the three strands on stage. Initially I wanted a child's voice, laughter and swinging on a trapeze, to give a sense of physical freedom. But at the Orange Tree they have no flying (being a small theatre in the round), so that had to be left out! At Stoke a montage of children's voices was used instead — to suggest an off stage effect, with Flora dancing and smiling centre stage.