

## **Slags on Stage: The Toxic Working Class Female in Contemporary Theatre and Performance**

The figure of the 'council estate slag' — the promiscuous working-class girl — occurs again and again in contemporary British performance, particularly social realist dramas (see for example *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* 1982, *Essex Girls* 1994, *Iphigenia in Splott* 2015). The slag is both a stock character, drawing on pervasive stereotypes of working class women and girls as loose and immoral to comment on the hopeless state of the modern social world, and a figure through which resistance to dominant modes of knowing working class culture is levelled. In Arinze Kene's *Misty* for example, the character Jade is evoked (though never seen on stage) and eventually complicated beyond stereotypical tropes, serving as example of the inner-city 'virus' that gentrification works to eradicate. Meanwhile in *Refuge Women*, the performer and writer Cash Carraway embraces media depictions of working class women to offer a searing critique of British journalism and its effects on the poorest sections of society.

In this paper I offer a feminist reading of the contemporary 'slag' on stage, rehearsing the argument for my forthcoming book (*Slags on Stage*). I trace the historical origins of the term slag, and the occurrence of the figure in popular culture, exploring how the bodies and lives of poor, 'common', and working women are regularly and often euphemistically positioned as toxic, dangerous and revolting. I look at the implications of this discourse for young and vulnerable women, drawing on the recent child abuse scandals in Rotherham and elsewhere to illustrate the real-world consequences of pervasive stigmatising representations. I propose that female sexuality still acts as a threat to the dominant order, and explore how,

despite the damaging consequences of the slag figure, evoking and embodying the slag on stage has enabled female, and especially working class female artists to resist external labels and narrate a world in which working class women are able to take control of our own bodies, lives and destinies.

I use the term 'slag', not as a term of derision for those bodies on stage — nor do I attempt to reclaim it as an act of feminist emancipation. Slag means what it means in the culture. Rather it serves as a terminological site from which to investigate the myriad ways that the object woman is created through discourses of class, sex and motherhood and how women have clung to that site as an act of resistance, embracing images of vulgarity, promiscuity and toxicity in order to find ways of dealing with the sexism and classism that shapes their experiences of the world.

### Bio

Katie Beswick is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter. Her research is concerned with class, space and culture and she has published widely on issues relating to class, particularly on the representation of the British council estate. Her monograph *Social Housing in Performance: The British Council Estate On and Off Stage* was published by Bloomsbury Methuen in 2019. She is also interested in street performance culture and contemporary depictions of sex, sexuality and relationships on stage and, as ever, elsewhere.