What is lesbian theatre? One may cite any of the following operational definitions:

—Lesbian theatre is about lesbians—i.e., content is structured around a theme that deals with the experiences, thoughts, and/or "lifestyles" of lesbians.
—Lesbian theatre is by lesbians—i.e., plays written by lesbians are lesbian plays regardless of theme.
—Lesbian theatre is played by lesbians—i.e., plays are lesbian when they feature gay women, whether out or closeted (like so many of the "greats" everyone knows about but no one talks about).
—Lesbian theatre is feminist theatre—i.e., because of its focus on woman/woman relationships, all feminist theatre is essentially lesbian theatre.
—Lesbian theatre is distinct from feminist theatre—i.e., lesbian plays concentrate on lesbian relationships rather than woman/woman relationships in general.
—Lesbian theatre is part of, but not the same as, feminist theatre—i.e., the shared focus differs from the sharp distinctions between "gay (male) theatre" and "straight (male) theatre."
—Lesbian theatre is consciousness-raising in performance—i.e., the lesbian audience requires theatre specifically dedicated to clarifying points concerning oppression, the validity of woman-to-woman relationships, and heroism divorced from male identity.
—Lesbian theatre is part of gay theatre—i.e., themes concerning homosexual relationships may apply to either gender and/or to shared elements of homoesthetics or homoeroticism.
—There is no such thing as lesbian theatre—i.e., theatre is theatre, whether gay or straight.
There is an element of truth in each of the above-noted definitions; the most accurate definition could probably be made from bits and pieces of all of them, with additions and/or corrections invited from any and all sources.

At the risk of offending some sister-lesbians, one may borrow a definition written by a man. With the word "lesbian" substituted for the words "gay" and "homosexual," the following is quoted from William Hoffman's Introduction to Gay Plays: The First Collection (Avon, 1979):

I define [lesbian] theatre as a production that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that there are [lesbians] on both sides of the footlights.

Such a description allows for a wide range of approaches. One can hold that lesbian theatre is basically feminist theatre because the latter "explores the dynamics occurring between women," to quote Clare Coss. Or, as Atthis Theatre's Keltie Creed puts it: "the dividing line between feminist and lesbian is quite elastic." At the same time, one might agree with feminist-theatre pioneer Sue Perlmut. Perlmut thinks that lesbian theatre is "very much about lesbians, their lesbianism, and their relationships." Too, such a general definition also permits inclusion of Jane Chambers' sentiment about gay plays: "The world calls them that, and producers call them that. As far as I'm concerned, they are plays."

Lesbian theatre as we know it today must inevitably be tied to the great surge of feminism associated with the 1960s and early 1970s. Two of the first woman-identified theatres were Caravan Theatre (Lexington, Mass.), founded in 1965, and Omaha Magic Theatre, founded in 1969. In view of common problems such as collectivism vs. hierarchy, message vs. entertainment, specialized audience vs. general audience, etc., it is particularly noteworthy that these ongoing companies have survived with their original founders. This is not the case with two other organizations almost as venerable. Neither Synthaxis Theatre (South Pasadena, Calif.), 1972, nor the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre (Providence), 1973, retains any of its original members.

In New York City, 1969 saw the birth of the New York Feminist Theatre with Lucy Winer and Claudette Charbonneau. In 1970, feminists founded the Westbeth Playwright's Feminist Collective and also It's All Right to Be Woman Theatre [see T54], with theatre-activist Sue Perlmut maintaining that women's culture deserved to be shown and "nobody else will [show it]." Womanrite Theater Ensemble and Women's Interart Center started in 1972. Roberta Sklar, then at the forefront of feminist theatre, remains extremely active [see T86]. Along with Clare Coss and Sondra Segal, she founded the Women's Experimental Theatre in 1977. The three women share authorship of Elektra Speaks. This play (Part III of The Daughters Cycle) is not called a lesbian play, but its theme—woman learning to be her own, independent spokesperson—holds considerable appeal for lesbians, explicit or implicit, on both sides of the footlights. The work was again produced in the late fall of 1980 at The Women's Interart Annex in New York, and extensive excerpts were published in the Union Seminary Quarterly Review (Spring/Summer, 1980).

The growth of feminist theatre has continued—with some, such as At The Foot Of The Mountain (Minneapolis, 1974), producing successfully over a period of years. However, more than two dozen have been dormant for varying periods of time. These companies include Women Of The Burning City (sometimes erroneously cited as being
the first troupe to explore the real lives of women), New York's The Cutting Edge, the New Feminist Theatre, and It's All Right to Be Woman (although Sue Perlmutt is forming a new group, with a production planned for the Spring of 1981).

With some collaboration by Phyllis Mael and Beverly Byers Hewitts, Rosemary Curb of Rollins College published an extensive "Catalog of Feminist Theatre" in *Crysalis*, No. 10. This material, which Curb continues to update, provides a useful rundown. Another source, published late in 1980, is *Feminist Theatre Groups* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.) by Dinah Louise Leavitt. With such references available, it seems unnecessary to pursue further listing here—except to note women's theatre groups that have specifically identified themselves as lesbian.

They are relatively few.

Starting in 1973, two associated groups emerged in Minneapolis: The Lavender Cellar and the Minneapolis Lesbian Resource Center. They first produced Pat Suncircle's *Prisons* and then, following a series of revue-type presentations, did the full-length play *Cory*—also by Suncircle. The script (which is on file at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York) portrays the dilemma of a 16-year-old girl trapped between her self-acknowledged lesbianism and the pressures of a hostile world.

. . . . *the play focuses on the character of Cory and her fear and frustration, [but] it also deals with related aspects of the same problem through Denise, who has not come to terms with her homosexuality, and Susan, who has. Society's rejection and misunderstanding of lesbianism is shown through the students who giggle about it, the school psychologist who regards it as mental illness, the mother who cannot even discuss it and the father who believes that sexual intercourse with a male will cure it. Sex-role stereotyping is presented through Cory's parents, who attempt to make a young lady of her, and through Susan's parents, who found motherhood under any circumstances preferable to lesbianism.* (Feminist Theatre Groups)

Of course, not all lesbian plays view lesbianism in terms of grief, frustration and inner struggling against outside rejection. For example, Kate Kasten's *On The Elevator* (also preserved by Deborah Edel and Joan Nestle at the Lesbian Herstory Archives) features two characters called Dyke 1 and Dyke 2:

_Initially repelled by the frankness of the conversation between Dyke 1 and Dyke 2, other elevator passengers back away. Then, slowly, one by one, each acknowledges her or his own homosexuality: the old woman, the hard-hat, the waitress, the child, the businessman, the teenager, and the janitor. The skit celebrates the coming-out process._

Another of the many scripts on file is *December To May*, a play by Jane Staab in which husbands must confront their wives' falling in love.

But, for the moment, less of plays and more of theatre companies.

Other "early" groups plainly identifying themselves as lesbian rather than feminist started in the mid-1970s and, like the Minneapolis organizations, seem not to have survived. The Red Dyke Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia was founded in 1974. According to Curb's listing, their main purpose was "to entertain lesbians and celebrate their sexuality, not to educate straight people about lesbians and gay issues." On the other hand, the Lesbian-Feminist Theatre Collective of Pittsburgh (organized in 1977) set
about to dispel “myths about lesbians for straight audiences.” Medusa’s Revenge (New York), 1977, aimed to explore “a homoesthetic sensibility” in theatre that played to women-only audiences.

Other lesbian theatre groups have survived and several have been started in the past year. Companies currently producing include—among others—the Lesbian Community Theatre in East Lansing, Michigan; the Washington Area Feminist Theatre (Judith Katz); the Cambridge (Mass.) Lesbian Theatre, with Sequoia as artistic director; Attis Theatre in Toronto, Canada; and The Whole Works, a collective in Berkeley, California. More than 20 other groups identify themselves as “lesbian/gay theatre companies” and perhaps half-a-dozen are described by the Gay Theatre Alliance as “not specifically gay theatre companies, but either regularly do gay plays, or are closely related to the concerns of gay theatre.” Still others are on no special list. For example, it seems highly unlikely that either Georgetown University or Alabama’s Tri-State University would care to have itself classified as lesbian. Yet both these institutions performed Jane Chambers’ A Late Snow, described in the Gay Theatre Alliance Directory of Gay Plays (New York: JH Press, Terry Helbing, editor) as follows:

Five women are snowbound in an isolated cabin: Ellie, a college professor; Perfect Peggy, Ellie’s first lover; Pat, an antique dealer, Ellie’s last lover; Quincy, a college student, Ellie’s current lover; and Margo, a novelist, Ellie’s next lover.

Thus at this time, it seems that the production of lesbian theatre need not necessarily be confined to groups that specifically define themselves as lesbian. This lends some strong support to those who have maintained there is really no dividing line between what is lesbian and what is feminist. In 1974, Charlotte Rea quoted the New York Feminist Theatre’s explanation:

We do not feel a lesbian/heterosexual split. . . . every member of the cast, lesbians and heterosexual women, assumes the lesbian role at one point or another. At the end of the scene, the entire cast declares their lesbianism.

(The Drama Review, T54)

During the same era, the It’s All Right to Be Woman Theatre consistently explored problems they felt applied to both gay and straight women. And as recently as late November of 1980, Sondra Segal explained that by “unearthing what’s suppressed” and by being “woman-identified, woman-centered, and addressed to and derived by women” feminist theatre can be equated with coming out, hence reflecting the special experiences and sensibilities of lesbians.

What are some of the other ways in which lesbian theatre can be compared with feminist theatre? In both categories, most groups—especially in “the early days”—started out as collectives. Many worked not with scripts and not with directors, but tended to pool their individual experiences into material they believed would reflect both the uniqueness and the universality of women’s lives.
Somehow the collectivity did not always work—especially when theatre took a backseat to feminist rhetoric. More and more, theatre groups have returned to written scripts (even when, as with *Elektra Speaks*, early readings incorporate audience feedback and a gradually built script emerges slowly over a period of time). A number of companies have also returned to the use of directors, people trained in acting, and more sophisticated staging techniques.

Other comparisons can be made with the ways in which both lesbian and feminist theatre draw from the experiences of women as women experience them (not as men think they do); the importance of woman/woman relationships (mother/daughter, sister/sister, aunt/niece, friend/friend, lover/lover); an emphasis on personal, internal reality; retelling old stories (e.g., classic myths, socio-political history, societal expectations) from a female or feminist perspective; and a reliance on other women for support.

These shared aspirations can perhaps be neatly summarized by quoting a few lines from a chart prepared by *At The Foot Of The Mountain* (Minneapolis) after the group became an all-female, feminist theatre collective:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Patriarchal Values</th>
<th>Female Matriarchal Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codified</td>
<td>Changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ideas</td>
<td>Concrete images/details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are some of the ways in which lesbian theatre can be compared with just plain theatre? In February 1980, *Last Summer At Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers opened at a small theatre in the Chelsea area of New York City. That Spring it moved uptown to Mainstage Two. By late Fall-early Winter, it graduated to the Actors Playhouse in Greenwich Village. *Last Summer At Bluefish Cove* takes place at a lesbian vacation spot on Long Island. Seven women, old friends, have gathered in their usual summer cottages preparing as best they can to enjoy what they all know will be Lil's last summer. Through a “slip-up” on the part of a realtor, one of the cottages is rented to Eva, a straight woman who has just left her husband. Lil and Eva fall in love and their relationship heavily affects the entire group.

The play—produced by The Glines and directed by Nyla Lyon—was remarkable in its capacity to draw not only lesbians and gay males but also a general audience of straight people ranging from teens to senior citizenry. Chambers says that “nobody seems to be concerned that it's about a love affair between two women. They seem most concerned that it's two hours of good entertainment.”

Commercial success—along with a broader, general audience—also came to Chambers after *A Late Snow* was published in *Gay Plays: The First Collection*. Until that time, the play had been produced only once—at the Clark Center (New York) by Playwrights Horizons in 1974. Hoffman's book was released in 1979, and by December 1980 *A Late Snow* had been produced not only at Georgetown and Tri-State Universities
Two plays by Jane Chambers: (left) Handbill from the original production of *A Late Snow*, Playwrights Horizons, 1974; (below) Jean Smart (left) and Aphrodití Kolaitís in The Glines First Gay American Arts Festival production of *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, 1980.
but also by the following companies: The Lysistrata Women’s Group (Madison, Wisc.); Third Base Productions (Fayetteville, Ark.); The Painted Ladies Theatre Company (Winnipeg, Canada); the Rochester (N.Y.) group first called The Up Front Production Company then Rising Productions; The Celebration Company (Urbana, Ill.); Helena Fesbians (Helena, Mon.); The Out-and-About Theatre (Minneapolis); Atthis Theatre (Toronto, Canada); and the Lesbian Community Theatre (East Lansing, Mich.).

No matter how one chooses to define lesbian theatre, both A Late Snow and Last Summer At Bluefish Cove are very much about lesbians—but both also hold their own as commercial successes with a general audience.

So if lesbian theatre shares much with feminist theatre and much with theatre-in-general, what needs to be added about it that makes it special? Let’s check with representatives of currently functioning companies that define themselves as lesbian.

The Atthis Theatre in Toronto is a small, nonprofessional group that “grew from and grows around a particular audience: a lesbian audience.” Kellie Creed explains that the group is comprised of “lesbians using theatre for expression more than thievesians focusing on lesbianism.”

As has been true with a great number of such companies, Atthis Theatre conducts open discussions after performances, and audience participation has yielded a number of themes and issues that are dealt with in workshops and explored through work-in-progress productions. A few examples are child custody, dual-family merging, coming out (“emotionally, socially, politically, and sexually,” Creed elaborates), harassment, sexuality, roles and relationships.

For Atthis Theatre this scheme has worked well because Creed and her associates have experienced difficulties in their script searches. This is ascribed partly to “lack of quality material, partly to lack of contacts, and partly because scripts have been confiscated by [Canadian? USA?] postal customs officials.” On the latter, Creed observes: “This has never happened to me in my straight theatre experience.”

Creed is among those who find “much of feminist theatre . . . to be lesbian.” Atthis Theatre presents only works written by women. “I don’t choose to pour my energy and the energy of the women with whom I work into the expression of a man’s conception of our life when so many women are struggling to find media for their voices.” Then Creed adds a little wistfully: “I just wish that we could connect with more of those voices.”

Like many women in theatre, Creed complains about the absence of “a network to plug into” (as well as a lack of resource people and money). But when A Late Snow was published, Creed directed a production in 1979 with a cast that included Lyne Waddington (with Shelagh McNally as alternate), Shelagh MacGillivray, Sheila Miller, Kate Swann and Marcia Cannon.

Speaking for The Whole Works—a lesbian theatre group in Berkeley, California—Eliza Roaring Springs echoes Creed’s complaint about the difficulty in obtaining suitable material:

_We write our own material largely out of necessity. Since it is so difficult to get material published to begin with, the amount written has been limited, and access to it is next to impossible._

Roaring Springs also agrees that “feminist theatre as a larger category also encompasses our form of lesbian theatre.” She defines lesbian theatre as “theatre performed by lesbians, primarily for lesbians, [presenting] our experience of life from a lesbian perspective.” However, she notes that “lesbian theatre encompasses many different forms. Ours is shaped by our strong socialist and feminist consciousness.”
The Whole Works—(left to right) Eliza Roaring Springs, Michele Simon, Elaine Magree and Penny Pollard—in Ain't It Something.

During the Spring of 1980, The Whole Works toured the West Coast rather extensively (as far north as Seattle) with Ain't It Something. Using a wide variety of theatrical styles (ranging from song and dance to tragedy and satire), the play takes on a number of socio-political issues: occupational health, tenants' rights, gay oppression and others. One skit involves two lesbians at their respective office parties: one is out, one is in the closet.

Sequoia, artistic director of The Cambridge Lesbian Theatre, would probably agree with Roaring Springs' statement that "lesbian theatre encompasses many different forms." While hardly oblivious to the more "political" aspects of lesbian/feminist theatre (the subtitle to her play First Lover is "The Anti-Death-Culture Scream"), Sequoia celebrates the sheer joy of declaring lesbianism. "To get on stage and cry, sing and laugh out loud that you are a lesbian, that you believe in lesbians, that you are happy to be a lesbian" is an experience Sequoia believes to be especially liberating. She decries the long years of silence and cites Diana Davies (author of The Witch Papers), who calls her show "the voices of women whirling through the silence."

The question of searching for scripts remains essentially unanswered. Obviously publication of A Late Snow propelled the play into a number of productions. Also helpful are various lists (such as Curb's) and some reasonably thorough collections (such as that of The Lesbian Herstory Archives). Yet Sequoia mentions several lesbian shows performed in New Orleans in 1977 and 1978 (Dyke Drama Drag Show, Outlaw
Music and I’m Gonna Live To Be An Old Womon Theatre’s Free Womon) that seem to have escaped notice. There are probably countless others. And although some organizations have sought to collect lesbian scripts, how many theatre groups have ready access to, for example, The Lesbian Herstory Archives?

In the Directory of Gay Plays — omitting mixed authorship (i.e., a woman and a man), “lost plays,” and works that have seen only British productions — the female-male ratio is startling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Playwrights</th>
<th>Male Playwrights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, scanty as the references that have been given here may be, evidence indicates that we can all be perfectly certain that there are hundreds of lesbian plays out there — many of which have never been produced but, clearly, including a sizeable number that have been staged.

One thing that is very much needed is a complete cataloging of all lesbian plays (as distinguished from feminist plays that do not specifically state their lesbian orientation). The compilation could begin with plays that have been produced — anywhere and under whatever circumstances! — and be supplemented by a listing of unproduced works the authors of which, singly or collectively, consider ready for presentation on stage.

Another educational tool for creating heightened general awareness would be more of the kind of work done by writer-director Terry Wolverton. At a Lesbian Art Project held in May 1979 in downtown Los Angeles, Wolverton and a dozen collaborators presented An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism with storytelling, magic and theatre. As a kind of journey into lesbian consciousness, the women sought to answer theatre-related questions such as: Is it performance? Is it art? Is it theatre? Is it therapy? The resulting 24-scene revue (to quote the Directory of Gay Plays)

explores issues such as coming out, coming on, mothers, racism, homophobia, incest, team sports, butch and femme roles, sexuality and lesbian future visions, combining music, dance, performance and video.

Also helpful would be more festivals or congresses where people are able to see lesbian theatre. The sheer availability of so many and such diverse productions would also offer the added advantage of inviting critical commentary by viewers whose expertise can further increase awareness. Case in point: Rosemary Curb has written and lectured about her reflections on the First Women’s Theatre Festival. This festival was held in Boston in May 1980 and featured more than 20 women’s groups — some of them explicitly lesbian. Similarly, in the January 22, 1981 issue of The Advocate, Jane
Chambers describes her reaction to several performances given at the Women’s One World Festival (New York, October 1980). Sponsored by the AllCraft Foundation and Allied Farces (a group that includes two members of Spiderwoman), the festival presented 49 theatre events. Uncloseted lesbian representation was quite prevalent, with companies such as The Radical Lesbian Feminist Terrorist Comedy Group and performers such as Robin Tyler and Pat Bond.

While—just as in straight theatre—companies come and go, it seems clear that lesbian theatre is here to stay. It’s theatre that, according to Keltie Creed, is attracting women who “had never seen a play before.” Thus people involved with theatre in general might want to show particular support for attempts to explore and describe the genre.

And for lesbians in theatre, better understanding of the specialness and/or nonspecialness of lesbian theatre should lead not to constraints but rather to greater artistic freedom and increased access to the stage side of the footlights.

After all, isn’t making the implicit explicit a shared aim of all theatre?

Emily L. Sisley, co-author of The Joy of Lesbian Sex, has also published fiction, criticism, poetry and essays. Her comedy, The Freddie Corvo Show, was produced by The Glines.