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Phallic Balloons Against the War

Who says there's nothing new under the sun? Monday, March 3, saw the emergence of a new kind of protest against war—the Lysistrata Project. Back in January, two clever and indefatigable New York actresses, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower, had the marvelous idea of staging readings of Aristophanes' hilarious and bawdy antiwar profeminist play, in which the women of Greece, led by the strong, intelligent and fearless Lysistrata, unite to withhold sex from their warrior husbands until they agree to end the Peloponnesian War. Before they knew it, the project had grown to include more than 1,000 readings in 59 countries from China to Argentina. The United States had 700, with 67 in New York City alone.

Ever the enterprising reporter, I passed up numerous opportunities to see the play in wintry parks and outside neoclassical buildings (brrr), on the subway, at Grand Central Station, in bars, libraries and bookstores, and caught a performance at the Barnard College cafeteria, where students offered a high-spirited all-girl reading, complete with balloon phalluses, to their lunching classmates. That night, I saw the all-star version at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which offered gymnasts, bongo drums, a band and yet more phallic balloons, and featured, among others, Kathleen Chalfant, Kevin Bacon (!) and an unforgettable Mercedes Ruehl as the witty and redoubtable heroine.

How to account for the project's triumphant popularity? As Bower put it at BAM, "Nobody can resist an ancient Greek dick joke." Well, yes, there's that. What a pleasure it was to have fun, vitality, humor and sex on our side, not to mention the literary canon, the glory that was Greece and the majority of the world's population, and leave the other side stuck with Confederate flags, Bible study and bigoted prom queens like Ann Coulter. The Lysistrata Project belongs to something new in political organizing—Internet-fueled grassroots arts activity, in which a master blueprint is quickly adopted and freely adapted at the local level—like last month's antiwar poetry readings and V-Day, a spin on Valentine's Day in which Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* is staged at hundreds of campuses and communities across the globe as a feminist fiesta and fundraiser.

Will any of it make a difference? Bush seems about as deterrable as Godzilla, and by the time you read this the bombs may be raining on Baghdad. But the longer our protests prolong the prewar moment, the more isolated the war party becomes. Meanwhile, our movement grows in numbers and creativity.

Like Code Pink, the semiparodic, all-women antiwar group that is conducting a vigil at the White House and demonstrates in garden hats and feather boas, *Lysistrata* plays on some very old stereotypes. Both say men are violent and women are peaceful, men love guns and women love children, and propose that men messed up the world and women can fix it. The positive aspect of this vision is that it gives disregarded and disrespected ordinary women a platform—as mothers and homemakers—from which to demand attention as significant social actors; the down-



side is that it valorizes that very powerlessness.

It was one thing for Aristophanes to fantasize that the women of Athens—who had no rights and little public presence—could turn the tables on their men: Comedies, after all, are about reversals of the usual order. Thus Aristophanes' men are emotional and weak-willed, while his women are (comparatively) rational and firm; his patriarchal state is no match for a motley group of housewives, who seize Athens' treasury and manage it perfectly well, thank you. In his play, the women's victory brings peace, but also a restoration of the accustomed gender order: Everyone goes home to make up for lost time in bed. Curiously, Lysistrata seems to have no husband or family—perhaps because, as Barnard classics professor Helene Foley suggested to me, she is a stand-in for the virgin goddess and protectress of the city, Athena. But maybe also because, even in a comedy, a brilliant, self-confident, female leader who treats men as equals was too obviously incompatible with Athenian family values.

There's certainly enough left of the old gender order to keep the play funny and relevant, and I enjoyed Lysistrata Day tremendously. But for the long haul, gender-based appeals to women trouble me, even when they're funny (sign at a Washington demo: PATRIOTS ARE IDIOTS—MATRIARCHY NOW!). Yes, women still have primary responsibility for children, are still vastly underrepresented in corridors of power, are constantly overlooked and underrated, and are still more likely the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence. But America is a different place than it was in the 1960s, when Women Strike for Peace offered women a maternity-based logic for organizing against nuclear testing.

Women don't live in a separate domestic sphere anymore. We don't need to use our children to claim the right to speak up. Women are educated, we work, we vote, we buy our own cars and fix our own computers. Increasingly, the sexes don't fit the old binary oppositions: 15 percent of the military is female; many women have no kids and don't want any; many fathers are as deeply invested in hands-on parenting as mothers. Violence is no longer the sacred preserve of men: The NRA does everything short of painting guns pink to sell them to women. For progressive women, in 2003, to fall back on the ideology of woman-as-peaceful-outsider rings as false as Phyllis Schlafly pretending to be a housewife. That's why Code Pink has to resort to out-of-date costumes.

Women have been enthusiastic participants in some wars, such as the liberation struggles of Vietnam and Algeria. But there is indeed a US gender gap of about 13 points on Bush's plan to invade Iraq, with 44 percent of women opposing it, versus 31 percent of men—likely because his "pre-emptive war" is exactly the sort of foolish adventure Aristophanes was talking about. (In 413 BC, two years before he wrote *Lysistrata*, the Athenians invaded Sicily, with disastrous results.) The big story, though, is not about gender at all. It is that around the world, just about everybody, male and female, is against this war. ■