

2015 ASTR/TLA Annual Conference

"Debating the Stakes in Theater and Performance Scholarship"

Portland Marriott Downtown Waterfront

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Distinguished Scholar Award: Award Announcement from David Savran, Previous Distinguished Scholar Award Winner

It is a great pleasure to announce today that the 2015 Distinguished Scholar Award goes to Gay Gibson Cima. Gay is a path-breaking feminist theatre scholar, a teacher of distinction, and a long-standing officer of ASTR. A proud Nebraska native, who still sports a Nebraska twang, Gay is part of the first generation of feminist academics and her three books represent major contributions to the study of women's performances in the public and private spheres.

I first met Gay (gulp) forty-one years ago, when we were graduate students at Cornell, studying with Marvin Carlson and Bert States. Those were the heady days when theory first hit U.S. universities and we would argue late into the night about Ibsen and Foucault, Japanese theatre and semiotics. Gay was then—and still is—the life of the party and even after several glasses of wine—especially after several glasses of wine—can explain why Elizabeth Robins represents the quintessence of Ibsenism.

Gay's first book, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage*, studies female actors whose fame has come from their work in plays by male master playwrights and argues that style has come to be identified with the playwright's work rather than that of the performers who gave it currency. Studying actors ranging from Harriet Bosse to Billie Whitelaw, Gay underscores the skill of female actors in "mak[ing] visible and critique[ing] the performative nature of the idea of woman." Her second and third books move outside the theatre and focus on the breathtaking array of civic performances by black and white women in the United States. *Early American Women Critics: Performance, Religion, Race* expands the roster of critics by arguing that women used "host bodies" or performance roles to cut across the divisions of race and class, freedom and servitude. By reimagining the work of lost or excluded women, Gay creates a visceral sense of their interventions in public discourse. Finally, Gay's most recent book, *Performing Anti-Slavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages*, is itself a work of activist scholarship. It demonstrates the effectivity of black and white women in the political sphere and their decisive role in ending slavery in the U.S. And even though it is focused on the nineteenth century, its contemporary relevance is indisputable. As Gay writes: "Analyzing activist women's diverse performance strategies within the antebellum anti-slavery movement reveals new ways to harness affect for political purposes . . . [I]t raises thorny questions about ongoing anti-slavery efforts," struggles against human trafficking and forced labor.

Gay's work proves that rigorous archival research can be rigorously theorized. And she never loses sight of the instrumentality of performance—here—today. Nowhere has Gay's commitment to community been demonstrated more palpably than in her many years of service to ASTR, dating back to the 1977 conference on popular entertainment that helped legitimize popular culture as an object of study. Since then, Gay has twice served on the Executive Committee and was program chair of the infamous 1989 Williamsburg conference, for which she deserves a Purple Heart. I, however, remember her most vividly during her three years as

Secretary of ASTR, while Charlotte Canning was president and I was her vice. Attending meeting after meeting with Gay, I will never forget her poise, diplomacy, and bull's eye aim. It is an honor and delight to welcome to the podium Gay Gibson Cima.