

FIREWEED



A Feminist Quarterly

FIREWEED: A Feminist Quarterly

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Rina Fraticelli
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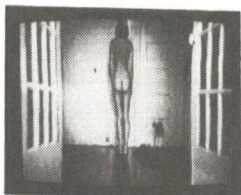
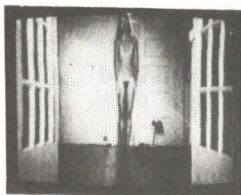
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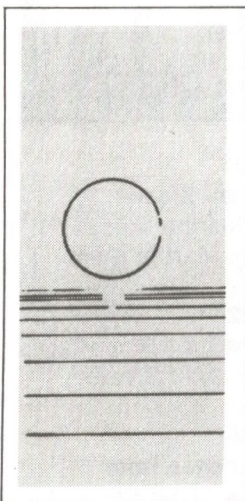
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Editorial

Women and Performance Performance Women

After the first impulse of the women's movement, the impulse for equal pay, job opportunities, child care, everyone was left with what they had gained. So what happened is what happens to every movement: after the political process is the process of self-definition.

Joanne Akalaitis, discussing her theatre piece on the life and work of Colette, *Dressed Like An Egg*.

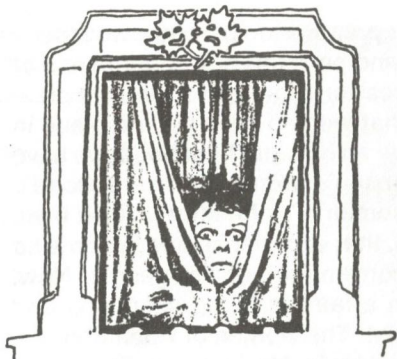
What has been most exciting in the preparation of these two issues devoted to the subject of women and performance is our sense of witnessing the opening and demarcation of a new terrain, the creation of a new geography. To say that women have had no place in performance until recently would be an obvious falsehood: we have had Shakespeare's women and Ibsen's women, Edward Bond's women and, closer to home, the women of John Murrell. And if we didn't recognize ourselves in them, that experience had become so familiar as to be designated a "convention" of the genres. Now, however, the landscape of human affairs is being described and recorded from another vantage point. The women of Robin Endres, Sharon Riis, Carol Bolt, Merdith Monk, Maria Irene Fornes — among others — comprise a new vocabulary of characters and images for performance. And for women, a new way of seeing and being seen.

If characters are always, by definition, fictional, the creation of women by women now allows for the body of performance literature to include *self-fictions*: fictions only once removed from their source.

It's a question of perspective. We are the traditional *objects of viewing* — "woman as spectacle" as Kay Armatage phrases it. And we are continually present in these media as we are *believed to be*, *imagined to be* or *desired to be*. These can be valued reflections of ourselves through the eyes of our "others" only when they are balanced and informed by the equal contributions to the repertoire of how we see, imagine and fictionalize ourselves — and, as importantly, our worlds. A shift in voice, from passive to active; a shift in our relation to the camera, from the recorded to the recorder; and whole new worlds come into view.

As Canadians we are particularly sensitive to the need for a community to nurture its voice, to articulate and embody its own distinct experience: both as a nourishment in its present and continuing self-definition in the shadow of a larger, more "real" culture and as legacy given intact. So we, as women, must contribute to the process of defining and validating our reality for both ourselves and our heirs.

The power of these pieces of conceived reality, living characters whose presence argues more persuasively than any ideological tract, signals the need for diligence. We have argued passionately of the need to redraw maps which violated the subtleties and complexities of the landscape. The challenge now resides with us to bring our truest and most difficult perceptions to bear, to accurately trace our heavens *and* our hells: to make the "fictions" true to ourselves and the map true to the terrain.



As Canadians we
are particularly
sensitive to the
need for a
community to
nurture its
voice . . .

Joss MacLennan

Women and performance. In an age of performance technology (performance engines, performance cars), women have not been exempt from the new standards of proficiency, efficiency, power, execution: clearly one of the newest additions to the media's vocabulary of images is the Performance Woman. And one result of this impulse towards doing, producing, acting in the world — an impulse which is perhaps primarily internal, however much it is shaped and modulated by the hype which envelops us — is that we are using a new yardstick of validity to see if we measure up. Before, reassuring ourselves by our Be-ing: How we were to others. Now Do-ing: hard cold currency of accomplishment.

The results are hardly in. Yet whether or not we are *in fact* more capable, more able, more powerful, we do *imagine* we are. The potential implied in this imaginative freedom is not to be discounted.

And to the degree to which imagined potential has become actuality and to which we are indeed at liberty to extend ourselves beyond what was once — and still is for many — the traditional "feminine" sphere, we must question *to what ends?*

If we are emerging from the grey shadow of being un-men, semi-men, demi-men, are we now reborn merely to become full-fledged manlings? If we are now opening our mouths to receive, intact, the wafer of the status quo as our rightful heritage, should we not be concerned about being able to swallow it?

This issue of *Fireweed* is to my ear a chorus, a choir of women's voices responding to this central question, saying yes, saying no, saying maybe. Although they are predominantly Performance Women, who are "doing," their response to their field of action is largely discretionary, critical: saying yes, saying no, saying maybe.

One thing about performance. It has to start with having something to say. Whatever our concern with quality, with professionalism, I think it's necessary to remember that virtuosity comes with practice, and practice only with the opportunity to try. And it is the need to sing, perhaps, which opens our mouths.

Rina Fraticelli, Rhea Tregobov
and the Fireweed Collective.



Peter Higdon

Notes Towards An Androgynous Theatre

Self-Profile: Robin Belitsky Endres

Robin Endres is a Toronto playwright.

So far, all political theatre has made one of two appeals to its audiences.

1. Stop feeling, *think!* (Brecht, et al.)
2. Stop thinking, *feel!* (Living Theatre, et al.)

One day, in Grade Seven, I came home from school and there was nobody home. There wasn't anything particularly unusual about that. I got something to eat from the fridge, then went into the bathroom, lost in my thoughts. I was in the middle of peeing when I came to and saw my mother's blood-stained nightgown in the bathtub.

Someone, I don't know who, had thought to soak that nightgown. You can't get blood stains out otherwise. No one thought to tell me something had happened to my mother.

The next time I saw her her head was covered with soft baby's hair, where it had grown back. She didn't recognize me. She was talking a lot, but none of it made sense. I thought I heard her say she wished they had let her die.

It was a stroke. An artery had burst in her brain. She had been thinking about going back to school and getting into medical

school. When she had gone to university, before she met my father, and against the wishes of her father, she had majored in philosophy: She got perfect scores on all her logic exams. Instead, she raised three children.

My father told me she was the first person in Vancouver to have "polar bear" surgery, which saved her life. In this type of surgery, the patient's body temperature is lowered to near freezing. This slows down the metabolism and allows the surgeons to operate on the brain. He told me these details with the same enthusiasm he had — has — for all scientific discoveries.

A friend of my mother's came and cooked for us while we learned about my mother's new, bizarre, brain-damaged behaviour. This woman came up to me and put her arms around me. I wanted to be comforted, but I could smell her perspiration. I broke away, went up to my room. I wanted none of the world of women, that terrible conspiracy of tears and intimacy, of blood and nylon nightgowns, of the sickening sweet smell of hand creams and lotions covering up the humiliating smells of the body.

Surely it was better to be a part of a world which found the idea of eight hours of surgery in ice water an interesting prospect from the point of view of science?

For a long, long time after that I was unable to make any conscious choices.

I am almost always lopsided, always renouncing one side or the other. "Female" language is so undisciplined, so irritatingly vague! Give me the precision of definitions, the elegance of science. "Male" language is so arid, so hard-edged, obdurate, obscurantist! Give me the warmth of ambiguities, the fecundity of a profligate nature, blood gushing out in a rush of words.

I go back and forth, around and around . . .

Schuster is four months pregnant, and she was walking up and down her living room holding my four-month-old daughter. She was telling me about the four-year-old son of friends of theirs who is a kind of geographical prodigy. He knows the names of dozens of countries in the world, their capital cities and their principal rivers. He knows the names of the three African countries bordering Lake Victoria. He prefers atlases to nursery books. On a map of Canada Schuster showed him he pointed to the area marked "N.W.T." and said, that's the Yukon. No, she said, it's the Northwest Territories. It's a misprint, he said. And he was right.

All the way to Toronto on the train, he studied the atlas and learned as many facts as he could about the city. He could not be persuaded by his parents to look out the window.

Each time Shuster walked past me I looked at the baby and

secretly revelled in the sight of the four dear dimples on the back of each of her little hands.

And I was thinking: there are no words to describe childbirth. Reality crashing through the plate-glass window of language.

I love the winter light the best; it gives such subtle beauty to the bare trees. Through the window I watch the white afternoon sky outline a tangle of brown branches, nature's random patterns, all the delicate lines confused but connected.

Like fish we swim through our lives. Something catches our flesh, we see we are not free. We flop on the shore, and we discover a language which describes our experience, a language we believe will make us free. Marxism. Feminism. The ruling class. The profit motive. Male chauvinism. The hook is still in our side, but the pain is anaesthetized by the instruments of theory. The anaesthetic becomes addictive. Meanwhile, here we are high and dry on the shore; we can't get back to the sea. We have trouble talking to the fish that are still in there. Why should they envy us? The air is clear here, sure enough. But it is so very hard to breathe.

When my baby was born, I stepped into the great eternal river of mothers and daughters. I think so often, these days, of my mother, Dorothy, and her mother, Caroline. Ivana, Robin, Dorothy, Caroline: each so different, each so alike. I must ask my mother what her grandmother's name was. I wonder — what was given, what denied? What was given, what denied.

If you read the original Marx-Engels-Lenin texts, they are full of love and anger. The original passion of the science of socialism in its infancy has been reduced to a set of empty formulations, arid male-defined polemics, a hollow language. No heart, no sexuality — and therefore, no *mind*.

That phrase we loved so much, that we always summoned with such conviction, to make the whole world rich with sense, that was father to me, and faith; and more than faith, knowledge; and more than knowledge, liberation: THE SCIENCE OF SOCIALISM!

Faded and tattered scraps on the side of the road. A gleam in the sun here or there — but it's only a bit of gold or silver chocolate bar wrapper or cigarette box foil. If once this language was a whole cloth tightly woven, colours true, bright — that is no more.

It's an unavoidable fact. There must have been a time when she held me and cared for me and loved me, watched me sleeping with

the same tenderness I feel now for my own sweet child.

Once I studied masks in a clown workshop. At first our false masks, our prepared faces, were loosened. For a while I could see the social face projected on other people's faces, hanging in front of their real face, sometimes just the real eyes flashing through. But as the exercises turned us inward, this face evaporated. We were naked. This was called neutral mask. Then began the exploration, the search, the inner journey. Masks became revelations, externalizations of that which was hidden, of the soul, of whatever you call that essence which is the uniqueness of each and every person.

How beautiful and fabulous was that array of shapes and colours!

That's just how it is with language. Either it drops a curtain between me and the world, or it draws the curtain back. It can conceal or reveal, lie or tell the truth. The truth is only this: *what we didn't know before.*

It doesn't matter what others see when they look at me. It only matters what I see when I look at the world. When that becomes practice as well as theory, then all the arias and all the colours of the rainbow will be mine for the asking.

Do I really care about politics at all any more? Have I, as some no doubt are saying, sold out? Am I really an artist? Real artists seem to worry about death a lot. Make art to protest against mortality. I'm not particularly obsessed with death. At least, not with the death of the body. But I am haunted by spiritual death, by thwarted creativity, by atrophied potential — mine and others, by those limitations which are the product of poverty, class society, racism, sexism. I write to defy the death-in-life that walks beside exploitation and oppression.

Some days I am just so full of music I could — Sing?

Because she was denied the need to be rational, scientific, logical, her brain exploded. Because he denied himself the need to be emotional, his heart atrophied.

I can say: Sexist, class-divided capitalism damages all of us. Or I can say: *There is blood on the moon.* And neither will give the whole picture. I want to find images that will be charged with meaning *and* sentiment, that will ask a question and elicit a feeling at the same time. The language of art and the language of politics are insufficient without one another. They must both be subsumed in the

charged image, the image that appeals to the thoughts and emotions, to the whole person, not to the lopsidedness.

To charge an image: Thread it through a piece, making it accrue both kinds of meaning as it moves through time.

When I was five, I went on a trip to the States with my parents. We stayed in a hotel with elevators, red carpets in the hall and a cute elevator boy I flirted with. They couldn't find a baby sitter one night (how well I know the feeling now), so they just decided to take me with them, out drinking and dancing. How I loved that! I sat on a big soft black leather chair and watched them move onto the dance floor, flowing through the music and the sounds of glasses and laughter and the coloured lights. Then I couldn't see them — I was lost! They had left me! Something was happening on the dance floor, and I couldn't see what it was. Everyone started moving off the floor, standing around the edges, watching. Then I saw, in the middle, dancing alone to the orchestra, my mother and father. They danced so beautifully together, all the other dancers had moved away to give them centre stage. A vision of grace, of movement. And I sat there, feeling I might just die with the beauty and joy of it. The music swooped and flew and circled, then slowly drifted down and into a suspended moment of silence as the dancers grew still. Then everyone in the whole nightclub broke into applause, dancers and drinkers alike. The members of the orchestra put down their instruments and clapped for my parents.

Now *that* was theatre.



More Life on the Road

Self-Profile: Margaret Dragu

Margaret Dragu is a performer in live events, film, video, theatre and dance. She likes to work and likes to collaborate. Currently she is living and working in Toronto, touring the A.M. Show, and developing a new work based on Susan Swan's series of short stories, The Northerners. This work, which will be showcased at Factory Theatre Lab in the winter of 80-81, examines the attitudinal, sexual and cultural shock experienced by Canadians while vacationing in southern climates.

More life on the road. I'll go anywhere/anytime to do almost anything. I just like to go. And to do. To perform. To organize. To make. To clean.

That's my new trade in T.O., by-the-by: *Housekeeper Exclusif*. It's a good gig. I work for film crew & production people. I know what they need having done some film myself. I know the pace. How much — after a few weeks of eighteen hour days — they love to come home and find clean underwear and sheets & everything neat and tidy.

But basically it's more of the old freelance rhythm.

Some cleaning. Some dance teaching. Some shows. Arnie Achtman and Guy Allen and I are getting booked with our new show called the *A.M. Show*. Ottawa and Montreal so far. We managed to

get it booked without really being forced to define what it is. Why does this get harder and harder? Its not *dance*. Not *theatre*. Not just *visual art*. Not really *performance art*. Not (for crying in the soup) a *multi-media event*. "Experience" sounds like L.A. circa 1974. And somehow *political theatre* sounds like turtlenecks at the Sorbonne.

But I guess it is a stew of all those things.

By now, we have (between the three of us) a lot of skills to draw on to say what we want to say. To tell a story. (I have nothing against narrative as long as it doesn't slow the whole thing down to the speed of *The Edge of Night*.) To get the social and political message across without doing a Billy Graham. To be live and transcend the borders of what you have defined as *the show*. When Arnie and I worked with Enrico Campana, he used to try to explain to us that the *cast* (oops — very theatre term) and crew should work together as a rock band. We never really got to that state. But, thatz sort of what we have to do with this show. Except its a new wave band. Not the new wavers in the skinny ties doing *garage music*. But the new wave band that is — you know — the very oddball but totally accurate urban band that gets in under the guise of new wave marketing.

Every time I use the word *marketing*, I think of doing market research for blue jeans. One summer when I was in Calgary. The worst of door-to-door. And the best of Ann Landers. But I'd much rather be a housekeeper and a dance teacher. Thru with stripping. I just have too much rage these days. It wouldn't be a good move. Yet it used to be so good. Really. Itz all zen, you know. (If you *think* you have the power and you can make things different and (dare I say it) beautiful — then you *know* you have the power because that is how you *see*; what you are made of; what the world around you bounces off of and what *is*.)

A.S.A. Harrison & I have written a book called *The Sisters of Mercy* — a treatise of stripping. She's fabulous. We are trying to get it published through a publishing agent. They are pretty cautious. No nibbles so far.

I can get a good case of the rage up about the no-nibbles-scene of action that I feel I'm constantly pitching against. The other actress in *Surfacing*, Kathleen Beller, was surprised I hadn't continued to do more film work after our gig last summer together. After all, I was now "experienced," right? I've done three films now — a docudrama by Janet Walczewski, the feature by Claude Jutra, and a half hour by Angelo Stea. After all this, I can say that I love the medium of film. I mean wow. But I'm not sure about the in-

dustry. Few producers in the industry with any guts. Or vision. Beryl Fox is cool. After all was said and done, and we did have our problems to solve; she gets a yes vote from me. She is a real film maker as well as a producer.

But itz not just in the literary scene, the film world, or the theatre. Itz everywhere. Marketing. Oh oh. Do the marketing. Itz Coles' Bookstores makes the decisions. And MacDonald's. And on and on. Milk, eggs, bread, yoghurt, vegies, grapefruit, coffee. I want to enter the market place. I'm ready. But I want to negotiate the terms. And it should be worth my energy — why compete like Hell over Maxi-pad ads . . . Tearing someone's eyes out to be first to meet the producers of fresher-firmer-thicker and more absorbent. Someone said that women in Montreal dress for men — and that women in Toronto dress for women. Do you think thatz true? I haven't worked out the competition issue yet. More later. I'm just a freelancer. What do I know?
Love, Dragu . . .



Guy Allen

LISA STEELE: Hearing Voices

by Martha Fleming

The power of the voice in biography and autobiography is something we have no choice but to reckon with. Thereby hangs the tale. The physical voice — on the subway, over coffee, overheard — is the actual personal tool and signifier of the metaphoric voice of identity.

Our voices, the words we choose or choose not to choose to expose the details we choose to expose while telling a story which tells part of our lives, are the constant facts of our everyday-autobiographies. Lisa Steele tells stories too. Some of them are about herself, and others appear to be about other people. The majority of her stories, whether on videotape, in performance or in private, are monologues. They are stories told in one voice.

Lisa Steele is perhaps more aware than most people of the inextricable link the voice and the story it tells have to identity. She is aware of the potency of detail and its ability to allude to the whole of an event or a person. A large part of this awareness is her consciousness that any character is only real, any "voice" is only heard, when it is attended to or observed. Her vigilance demands our attention. And every listener is handicapped by what they can "identify" within the identity of characters they are attending to.

There is a very fragile balance in observing, recounting and at-



Lisa Steele in 'The Ballad of Dan Peoples'

tending. Good story tellers often mix them up, and great ones always do. Lisa Steele says, "My work is not about the present. The process of recording moves all of the content into the past, where the memory begins to filter it. I am a chronic liar trying to tell the truth. Sometimes this is possible."

Steele describes her videotape *The Ballad of Dan Peoples* (1976, b/w, sound 8 minutes) like this: "In tribute to her grandfather, Lisa Steele tells one of his stories in his voice." In fact, he/she tells several stories. But the real story is the heavy mid-western United States dialect Steele uses throughout. It is a short piece, and the only prop in the single scene/static camera monologue is a photograph of her grandfather which Steele holds between her hands on her lap.

She remembers one of the stories of his childhood which he told her when she was a child. Or rather, she remembers some of each of some of his stories and recounts them therefore as both observer and attendant. The narrative line in each story is hopelessly entwined with the narrative of all the other stories, and they are poignantly hung on the imitation of her grandfather's actual voice. She allows us to apprehend his metaphoric voice.

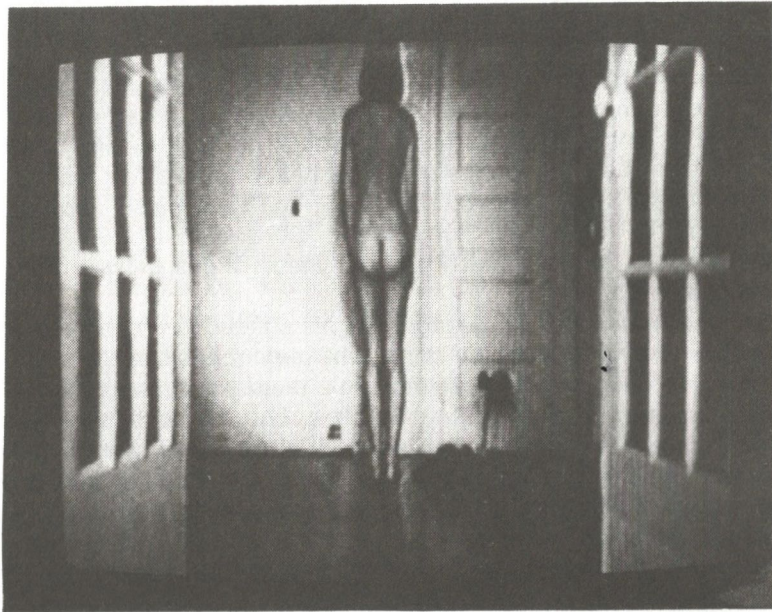
Awww, the Preacher he laugh an he laugh, the Preacher he laugh an he laugh and he says, Oh you boys, now you come

out here, now, you boys and you . . . Dad, he says, I don't want to hear you boys round here no more, I don't want to hear you boys round here no more. I said to him, rech over an grab that . . . I was goin down the road an I seen him bout half a mile down the road and I rech over an I clumb up on the chair an I rech over an I grab him by the neck an I said to him, I said, Dad, I ain't, to see you round here no more.

In the gaps between what she lets us know and what we observe grows a knowledge of the individual based on intimacy and intuition. The dramatic tension in this work lies not in the linear convention of narrative, but rather in the lateral construct of observing, recounting and attending to a story.

Birthday Suit; Scars and Defects (1974, b/w, sound, 12 minutes) is equally elliptical in a different way. Steele reveals to us in a bland and matter-of-fact way the chronology of the scars her body has borne over 27 years. Naked before the camera, she lists:

1958, opened door on top of foot, 11 years old.
1959, tendons cut by fall on glass milk bottle in school cafeteria. 12 years old.
1960, knife dropped on foot while making Eggs Goldenrod in Home Economics class. 13 years old.
1968, ran into branch while looking for waterfall in Banff National Park. 20 years old.



Courtesy Art Metropole

Though the implications of all the elements of this work are complex, the simple fact remains that the scars on her body evidence her story, and hence her identity. Steele's ability to discover new points of intersection between the observation/recounting/attention structure of story and the voice story = identity equation is at its height in this piece.

One of the first of a number of monologue tapes which do "tell the whole story" is aptly named *A Very Personal Story* (1974, b/w, sound, 17 minutes). It begins: "I'm going to tell you the end of the story first. The end is about . . . my mother dies in the end . . . so there won't be any punchline, so you know that before we start." The suspense is over before it starts, and we are able to attend more closely to the details of the story and the details of the storyteller whose face fills the monitor and whose hands nervously shield it from us. The emphasis is not on the event. Or is it? Steele seems to be saying that the minor events of that day are an inextricable part of what would appear to be the major event of that day, and by association, that a life's story is incomprehensible as merely a number of highlights. Again, Steele has juggled with narrative form and left her audience with detail and identity.

In the more recent tapes, Steele has added another ball to the juggling act. In beginning to explore and unfold characters who are not herself, she has placed herself on all levels of the storytelling construct at once. She must attend to the stories of others in order to recount them; she must observe their identity and the way they display it to in turn divulge this information to us. In *The Damages Makin' Strange*, *Tunnel of Love* and *Gloria*, all made in the last twenty-four months, Steele has synthesized a character in a series of cameos and monologues. And this character is a woman who, just below some line of social survival, oddly mirrors Steele's formal preoccupation with the dynamics of narrative. This woman's dilemma is that, because she is trapped in a socio-economic strata from which the only escape is escape, she must be observed in order to exist. She must recount her stories. She must be heard.

The following two texts are transcripts of the monologues from two recent performances by Lisa Steele. In these performances. Steele recounts the story that this character who has been so prevalent in her recent work must tell — that she must be observed in order to exist, that she must recount her stories, that she must be heard.

Performance Pieces

by Lisa Steele



Courtesy Art Metropole

Mrs. Pauly

(The following piece was first performed by Lisa Steele at the Body Politic Fundraising Benefit, January 3, 1979.)

Mrs. Pauly:

...Is this thing on? *(about microphone)*

Listen — I got two things to say. One, she shoulda never done it and two, if she had to go and do it I just wish she hadn't told me about it.

Listen (this is just between you and me) but there are things you just never talk about, you know. I mean things you never say. I guess in some ways ya know I still blame myself. I know sometimes I still go in to turn the water off . . . I mean little Patty and everything, I can still hear it, but I can't really remember . . . The hardest part is that she's my own flesh and blood. I mean but Gloria can just turn strange. Like after she spent the whole winter up in her room, just lyin' and lookin' out the window (you know across the street at the candy factory; that place that hires all the colored women to put them chocolates in them little black cups. Just this side of River Street, ya know?) Well anyway . . .

It was that winter after little Patty was born and she brought her home to me cause I mean, well she just wasn't capable, ya know. I mean, just laying there, not eatin' much and I wanted her to go to see the doctor, but I mean she didn't really put no store by doctors . . . I mean I'd try to get her to come downstairs. I'd go "Gloria come on down and watch some tv" and she'd go "maybe later" . . . but she never would. And then one day, I was sittin' on the chesterfield and I seen her come down the stairs with her coat on. And she said she was goin' out for some cigarettes. Well I found out later that she'd gone over to her girlfriend's place just a couple of streets over, ya know. And they were sittin' there just talking, that type of thing. Well this girl had one of them rubber plants, ya know. Sittin' in the window. The social worker had given it to her when she was in hospital having her twins. It was still wrapped in foil and everything. Anyway, she's got this little dog that she was keepin' for

Mrs. Pauly:

her cousin and the dog got kind of excited and he jumped up on the chesterfield and knocked off a twelve of beer on top of the rubber plant and broke it up pretty bad. And after that Gloria just went kind of blank, you know. Strange. And when she got back to my place, she kinda busted in through the front door and looked around like she'd never seen anything there. And then she says, "I thought they tore this place down." I mean I didn't know what to say to that.

I don't know exactly when, but it was sometime that week later on, that she found out that the Coffey Brothers were back in town, playin' at that place down on Queen. Anyway I says to her, 'Gloria don't go down there. It's just gonna make ya feel bad.' I mean, I know what they say, but personally I don't believe there's a word of truth when they say she's been with all six of the Coffey Brothers. I just can't believe that. It's only Eddy that done her dirt, ya know. Takin' the baby to his people down East and that type of thing. It's enough to make anybody, ya know . . . (But then little Patty, well, ya know, I don't know if the water was runnin' before or after I really can't remember. I told them, I can't remember, I know they didn't believe me. But I really can't . . .) Anyway, later, she'd gone out and then come back in and I knew she'd been there tryin' to see Eddy. And she come in and handed me this record. And she said that he didn't want to see her, you know. Kinda like she'd wanted to and he didn't want to . . . but he did give her this record, you know, his latest album "Live at the Alibi" . . .and I knew, ya know, that she was pretty upset . . . and I tried to kind of joke and I says to her, well Gloria, it's better than a kick in the pants and she laughs kinda . . .it was after that . . . But ya know, the water, and little Patty . . . they asked me about the water if I heard it runnin' before or after and I knew, I mean, that it was an accident but I just don't know . . . it bothers me still, I just can't remember . . .



("Hello, my name is Sandy," was first performed by Lisa Steele at the Fireweed Festival, Fall 1979.)

Sandy:

Do you need my social insurance number . . . or my OHIP number? I brought them along just in case. I didn't know. I thought you might need to write them down or something. Not that I don't know them by heart. If there's one thing I can do it's remember numbers. My friend Teresa calls me up from a phone booth sometimes to get her telephone number. I mean it's unlisted, her number's unlisted, but she can always look mine up. She likes to call home when she's out just to check and see if her neighbours have broken into her house. I know she has a thing about her neighbours. And I know she carries it to extremes sometimes. But she's got a good heart and she would do anything for me, anything. Gordon couldn't understand why I would even talk to her anymore. He just about went through the roof when she called up and said her neighbours were scattering pieces of paper in her front yard that said For Sale. She thought it

Sandy:

was some kind of message or something. And I asked her how many pieces of paper and she says she found two. Actually one part said For and the other part said Sale. Gordon said, "Sandy why do you even have anything to do with that woman. She's a nut." Well it takes one to know one, I thought. And vice versa, really. I mean Teresa saw what Gordon was up to long before anyone else did. She said Sandy, Gordon's trying to take that child away from you. It's little Lisa this, little Lisa that . . . it's not healthy.

I don't know why I couldn't have saw it earlier. I mean, I know I've made mistakes. I know I'm not perfect. I just wanted to get out. But I shouldn't have did what I did. Even Teresa told me. She called me up almost just as I was going out the door. I was all packed and everything. I knew I was going to have to get out. I mean things were getting bad and I just couldn't take anymore. And Teresa called me up because she couldn't find her little boy's shoe. And I said Teresa have you checked under the chesterfield? And sure enough it was there. Anyway, she said to me "Wait, Sandy, wait until little Lisa is home from school. Take her with you." And I should have did it. I could kick myself now. I should have listened to Teresa instead of the frigging lawyers (pardon my language). But holy doodle, I'm the child's mother and I've only saw her once in the last two months. And that was at Niagara Falls. And Gordon was there and Gordon's mother and Gordon's aunt. Now not that I don't like them. They've always been good to me, and I know Lisa had never saw the Falls, and they are beautiful, and Marine Land, I don't know, Gordon must have spent \$60 or \$70 dollars just on that one day. I know I can't provide things like that for Lisa. I know right now, I'm not in a financial picture that's going to allow that type of thing. I mean, Gordon's got the condominium, Lisa's got her friends nearby, her school, and I know he can give her things that I can't right now. And the lawyers say, "Sandy, think of the

Sandy:

child, you have to make sacrifices." But I just get confused sometimes.

I mean, even his mother said, before I left, "Sandy, you're playing third fiddle in this family." And she was right. Lisa came first, then his mother and then me. That's no life. I knew it, even at the time. When I think back, it seemed to start around the time when Lisa was about four years of age. We had just moved out of his mother's house and into the condominium and Gordon decided that he liked to have breakfast alone with Lisa and I wasn't allowed to eat in the breakfast nook with them. He said it was crowded, and besides he didn't get a chance to see her all day and I had her all day and he liked to have conversations with her and she's always been a bright little thing, all along. But sometimes later in the day, she would say to me that there were things that she couldn't tell me because Daddy told her not to. Now that hurt me. But I didn't really have no one to talk to. Except Teresa, but that was about the time that she was convinced that her neighbours were calling the Children's Aid everyday because they had saw her little boy put his head out the window. And I used to say to her "But Teresa, have the Children's Aid come?" And she would say no, but it took her the longest time to get over the fear that they would. It was about the same time that Gordon bought himself a brass bed. Now that bed cost him almost one thousand dollars and that's not including a mattress. Anyway this bed got moved in and our old bed got put in the den and from then on that's where I slept. I'll tell you that not once in those three years I lived in the condominium with that brass bed did I sleep in it. Not once. Not that it bothered me. I used to kid him and say "Well, Gordon, now the king is sleeping in the king's bed." And little Lisa used to get a kick out of that. The king's bed. Daddy's bed. She got a real charge out of that.

I mean I knew it wasn't right. I knew Gordon spoiled her rotten. He gave the child anything she wanted. Even Teresa said it. She sometimes

Sandy:

seen them go by in the car and she would say, Sandy, why don't you ever go for a car ride in the evening with Gordon and little Lisa? But it didn't really matter to me. I don't really enjoy riding in the car. I'm always putting my foot down, like I'm stepping on the brakes; even when I'm a passenger, especially when there's traffic. I guess I didn't mind not going, but I probably would have went if he had of asked. It just never came up. But it really used to bother Teresa. It really got under her skin. I think that was when Teresa was sure that her neighbours were cutting a hole from their basement into her basement. She called me up one day because she had phoned the police to come over and investigate and then she remembered that she had just painted her front steps and she wanted to know what she should do. How were the police going to get in her place? I said, Teresa, maybe you could get them to come in the back door and she seemed to think that was a good idea.

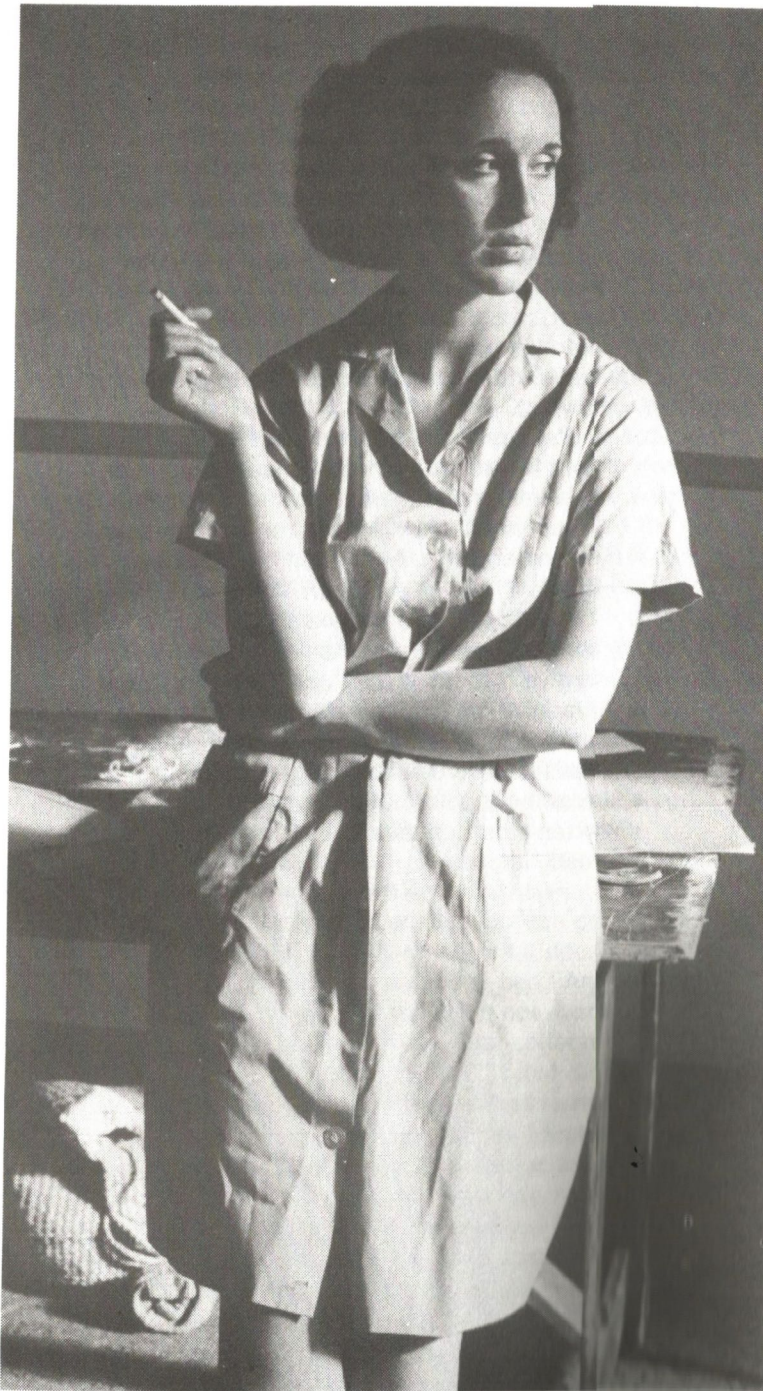
But things just seemed to go on and on like that. And I know that I can't provide that way for Lisa. I mean Gordon just went out one day and bought her a brand new bedroom suite, a canopy bed, matching drapes, end table, all that. She already had a perfectly good captain's bed, you know the kind with the pull-out drawer underneath? Well, it was still in perfectly good condition and we ended up giving it to one of Lisa's cousins because Gordon got her this new bedroom suite? I mean, what does a six-year old child need with a canopy bed? And besides I said to him, "Gordon, it's not even washable. That canopy is just a dust collector and it has to be dry cleaned anyway." It just didn't make any sense to me. But he just had to have it for Lisa. I just don't know, sometimes I just don't know.

But now, seeing how things are turning out, I knew I should never have left that day without her. But so many people were telling me different things. Sandy, you need to get away, you can get Lisa later. Sandy you need to rest. Go the legal route. Do it by the books. I should have listened to Teresa. Nutty old Teresa (that's what Gordon always called her). I should have listened

Sandy:

to her. But I never believed that Gordon would keep Lisa away from me. I just didn't think that would happen. Only let me see her once in two months, on the trip to the Falls. And even then, we only had a few minutes alone. That's when we went on the ferris wheel together. I don't really like the ferris wheel, it makes me dizzy, but Lisa *would* go on it. And just as soon as we got to the top, she said, Mommy give me your hand and I did and as soon as I did she stood right up and laughed out loud. She was holding onto my hand standing up. She's always been a brave little thing. It scared me to death, but she loved it.

But Gordon didn't like it very much. When we got off the ferris wheel, he went on and on about how I shouldn't have let her stand up, how I was irresponsible, how I wasn't a fit mother and so on and so forth. And I said "Gordon, don't spoil the day," but he just kept at it and kept at it and it seems that he had taken a picture of Lisa standing up in the ferris wheel and he was going to give it to his lawyer and how no judge would ever give me custody being the type of person to let that happen and so on and on. And I just can't believe that any judge would put any store in a blurry polaroid picture. I mean you can hardly tell who it is, but when I think about it I don't really know.



Courtesy Nightwood Theatre

Maureen White as Ida Johnson

NIGHTWOOD THEATRE TELLS THE TRUE STORY OF THE TRUE STORY OF IDA JOHNSON

The True Story of Ida Johnson chronicles the lives of two Canadian women from childhood friendship through adult separation to their eventual reunion. Ida Johnson tells her own story through a first person narrative that highlights the typicality of her life. Lucy George, on the other hand, travels in search of the extraordinary, driven by a belief in her own will. In Nightwood Theatre's adaptation of Sharon Riis' novel, the stories of the two women interweave in a montage of visual images, music and dance.

The relationship between Albertan writer Sharon Riis' first novel, *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, and Nightwood Theatre began in 1976 with the publication of the book by the Women's Press. Sensing its potential for dramatization, the editing group, spearheaded by Cynthia Grant and Christa Van Daele, launched the book with a one-hour reading in March 1977.

By the spring of 1978, Christa and Cynthia had decided to adapt the novel for the stage. They were joined by actors Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe and Maureen White to begin the collective workshop process that fall. Although more than one theatre was interested in the piece, none were willing to invest in the work. Our group's commitment to the work was very high, but without resources of funding or space, we knew that we would have to prove the value of the piece before we would be able to mount a full production.

Steven Baker at Cinema Lumiere came to the rescue by offering us free rehearsal space.¹ With this vital boost of support, more and more people became involved, donating time and creativity without salary. Composer/conductor Erna Van Daele created a score, architects Marie Black and Brian Barron produced the set, choreographer Louise Azzarello, our three male actors, and a mini-orchestra completed the group. Ah the madness . . . !

Cinema Lumiere proved the ideal setting for the development of "Ida," especially since we felt the piece to be naturally cinematic. Rehearsals began with Ida's monologues. The character of Ida as she appeared in the novel seemed perfectly written for the stage; her monologues were direct, self-mocking, and moving in a detached way. As Maureen worked on the role, the warmth of the character of Ida easily cut through the coldness of the old cinema. At the same time, the concrete floors, the concentrated dim lighting and the huge white screen that loomed before us gave a sense of Lucy's haunting, mythic presence. But Lucy's story proved more enigmatic and more difficult to stage. In the novel, Lucy was sketched in brief, dense, descriptive passages that isolated, almost photographically, moments in her life. She was a character defined by her isolation in the crowds, on a movie set, in a beer hall, walking the tightrope: a character much better suited to film than stage. Making the character of Lucy come alive on stage was to obsess us for over a year.

The point of a workshop is to explore and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a work while it is still in its development stages, and so it was with ours. Certain scenes, we learned from our workshop, worked well. One was the transition from Ida's thirteenth birthday (equipped with transistor radio, a brassiere — 32AA — and a furry watermelon otherwise known as a dink) through the strains of "Here Comes the Bride," to her wedding photos. It was also at this stage that we developed certain styles and techniques — such as the photographic freezes and the shifting narrative voices — which we would keep right through to our final production.

We presented the results of our workshop to the public for one evening at the U.C. Playhouse. The audience was immediately taken with Ida's self-conscious, rooted character and Riis' clever vernacular style; but they had difficulty relating to the non-verbal, more philosophical character of Lucy. We also learned we could create *leitmotifs* through music, and that the parallel stories of Ida and Lucy could be depicted using highly contrasting styles of performance — these were important discoveries to our work. And while we felt our presentation to be a success, we considered it not as a finished product, but rather as a "provocative moment in the process."

In the weeks that followed the presentation at the U.C. Playhouse, we looked for the means to continue our work on *Ida Johnson*, to move from the workshop space to a full production. We needed a "gift" of time, a space to work in, and some concrete funding. The handful of artistic directors from "alternate" theatres who had been present at that evening considered the work "interesting," "eclectic," "too realistic," or "too abstract." Meanwhile the general public urged us on, calling the work "... a beautiful story strikingly told," and comparing it with the best seen in the professional theatre that year.

We had to find money. Most of the members of Nightwood Theatre had been working in the professional theatre for a few years; yet, because theatre is a rather closed and incestuous business, financially, those with hundreds and thousands of government theatre-dollars would plead poverty to us, who had nothing. The crux of the problem is that there is no new money available for those who did not cash in on the boom of government spending in the arts in the late sixties and early seventies. The government now supports its maximum capacity of theatres, and the Councils seem to have absolved themselves of the responsibility of assessing merit as existing theatres continue on practically fixed incomes. By and large these do not share the wealth with others.

For Christa and Cynthia, two years of volunteer work had been devoted to this novel from the time of the receipt of the manuscript at the Women's Press. Now, we needed a break. The only avenue left was the Explorations Program of the Canada Council — a highly competitive program that funds everything from research into the history of church bells in Canada to a Cinemobile for the North.

Cynthia was in New York on a grant to study theatre when we found out the affirmative. The New York-Toronto phone lines buzzed with our surprise and excitement. Maureen and Kim flew down to talk about the future of the project and to see theatre in the "Mecca." During the summer, we would re-work the piece to open at the top of the fall season.

With just under seven thousand dollars to our name and a project already in development, we naively thought that a theatre would back us with a space in return for a box-office cut. We would learn otherwise. People, at that time, preferred to leave their theatres empty rather than allow a new energy into the building. Eventually, we rented the Side-Door Theatre from N.D.W.T. who proved to be helpful. This added a heavy expense to the budget and drove salaries well below \$100 a week. We had, in fact, what amounted to less than one-third of a moderate production budget.

Then, by the time we were ready to start, the unthinkable occur-

red: not everyone could continue with the project. Funding was so minimal and for such a short term that all other jobs and plans could not be dropped. After months of waiting and planning, we now found that the close bonds could yet be shattered by the nuts-and-bolts considerations of life. As a single parent, Erna felt constrained financially to take another, more lucrative job and Christa could not abandon her writing for two months of intensive theatre work. These were heavy losses to the project and definitely undermined the spirits of those continuing.

By the time we finished at Bathurst Street, the houses were overflowing and, finally, we knew the reason we had work so long. We were communicating their stories — Lucy and Ida existed on stage. We wanted badly to continue performances simply in order to share the piece with more people.

Yet, our transfer to Adelaide Court proved no easier than any other stage in the process.² In order to pay the steep \$1,000 per week rent, we all went off salary for the four week extension and still carry a \$1,000 company debt from this time.

The highlight of the Adelaide Court run was Sharon Riis' visit from Lac La Biche, Alberta. We waited with some trepidation for her reaction. She liked it (even our new monologues for Lucy) and found it particularly interesting, as she had been working on a filmscript based on her novel. That, to us, meant so much, as we had long tried to transpose her book from page to stage without distortion but with some necessary original and creative departure from it.

Ida for most of us was, and still is, seen as a turning point. We gained strength together, discovered the delight of working collectively, and understood again why we were so committed to this medium.

Though money continues to be a major obstacle, we do have plans: collective adaptation with an emphasis on a style approaching montage remains a major preoccupation with us. At the time of this writing, we are working on one piece which takes its inspiration from a prominent Canadian painter's work, and another piece which is framed by the events of nuclear disaster.

With the distance of time, we sometimes wonder if we really lasted a couple of years working together towards this one piece. The *Ida* project was an obsessive goal in our lives. Given stable financing, we'd do it again with passion, particularly in Vancouver or Alberta. Now, we long for contact with people whose interests are similar to ours. We believe that theatre has lagged far behind the development in the other art forms in this century and the concerns of the society on the whole. Here's to the future . . .

"Do you hear the coyote?"

"Ida, was all that stuff back there true?"

"What's the matter sweetheart? You miss the point or something?"

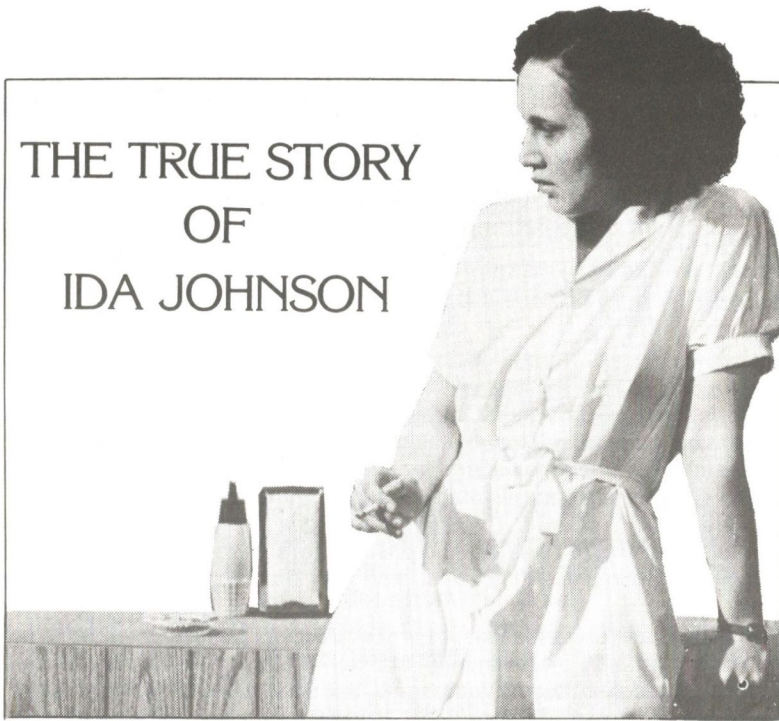
The True Story of Ida Johnson

Notes

¹In retrospect we know that he is the individual most responsible for facilitating the production of the piece. He believed in the material and the people involved when the theatres would risk nothing. By contrast, not only were we not assisted at this stage by any government subsidized theatre, we were actually abused. *The True Story of Ida Johnson* was listed as a possibility for the 78-79 season on one theatre's Canada Council application in order to impress the Council with their Canadian content.

²Full houses and some measure of artistic success seemed to matter to no one in power with the exception of Paul Thompson at Theatre Passe Muraille. Though he could lend some financial assistance, his theatre space was occupied. Adelaide Court at \$1,000 per week suddenly became available! Sensing panic on the part of Adelaide Court that their theatre would remain unoccupied, Thompson and Nightwood played "poker" with the theatre and forced them into the game.

THE TRUE STORY OF IDA JOHNSON



Courtesy Nightwood Theatre

Scenes from Nightwood Theatre's adaptation of Sharon Riis' novel

In her analysis of the masculine and feminine traditions in fiction made during a speech in Toronto some years ago, Germaine Greer located the roots of the masculine tradition in the worldly adventures of such novels as Tom Jones and Don Quixote; while fiction from women she saw as tending to be self-obsessed, highly introspective, and often self-destructive. Greer characterized the women writers as "...rather like birds pecking away at themselves," and called upon women to look outwards and around themselves, to include a social structure in their work in an attempt to blend these two impulses.

The True Story of Ida Johnson by Sharon Riis has as its focus the lives of two women Ida and Lucy who live out two very different life experiences while Riis makes us continuously aware of the societies in which the two live. In both the original novel and Nightwood Theatre's adaptation of it, Ida Johnson and Lucy George are understood and defined not in terms of their relationships to men, but rather through their relationships to the world. It

is in this respect that Ida Johnson distinguishes itself as a stronger, more exciting work than such recent plays as Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi (Theatre Plus, 1978) or The Splits (Toronto Free Theatre, 1978) whose women are obsessed with their relationships to men.

Because Ida and Lucy stand as powerful individuals who neither suffer as representative victims nor are ideal models for us all, the novel has been criticized by those who call for prescriptive formulas — the "Zhadanovism" of feminist criticism. But few female characters live out a philosophical choice as fully as Lucy George, with her Nietzschean belief in the will above all else. In the end, however, Lucy and Ida reunite, for each discovers in the other the completion of herself.

Riis has departed in this work from the realism so predominant in Canadian fiction to construct a novel of stylistic brilliance and innovation, weaving the text with the rich layers of shifting narrative voices. It was as much this stylistic divergence as the powerful drama of Ida and Lucy which drew the members of Nightwood Theatre to the text and invited us to the challenge of adapting the work for the theatre.

Precedents for our style of staging were not known to us in Toronto. The integration of the visual, musical and dance components within a structure which is narrative but not plot-oriented or action-based establishes a lyrical presentation on the stage through montage. Stylistically this effect was influenced by the work of Joanne Akalaitis (Mabou Mines) and in particular by her piece Dressed Like An Egg (New Public Theatre, 1977) which was based on the life and work of Colette. We wished to weave elements and, though none of the elements would themselves be new, hoped that the overall effect would be an original theatrical experience where the image might resonate, the musical themes would recur, and the total composition of the piece would work rhythmically.

We gained confidence through exposure to some of the newer techniques we saw employed by reputable companies in New York and at the Baltimore New Theatre Festival. Some of the key problem areas were discussed prior to the rehearsal period over endless coffees and bran muffins. For instance, we decided to cut the narration but to retain, through the use of slides with select passages of the novel, the removed voice of the third-person objective description. Also, we would strive to balance the two stories of the women more equally through the expansion of Lucy's role including original monologues for her. With the pieces before us, we could now complete the composition. In these pages, we can only describe a few of the moments...

Nightwood Theatre

Prologue Act I

(Music starts then voices on microphone . . .café in dim lighting.)

- Luke:** Why didn't you burn, Ida?
- Ida:** I was outside.
- Luke:** Outside? It was four a.m. What were you doing outside girl?
- Ida:** I thought I heard someone.
- Luke:** Did Derek hear anything?
- Ida:** No. He was sleeping.
- Luke:** Was anyone there then?
- Ida:** I didn't see anyone but . . .
- Luke:** But?
- Ida:** Well I really think somebody was there.
- Luke:** Who?
- Ida:** I don't know. But you see I went out to look I was so sure. That's when it blew up.
- Luke:** The trailer.
- Ida:** Yeah. Everything.
- Luke:** What did you do?
- Ida:** Nothing. The whole town was there before I even moved.
- Luke:** How did you feel?
- Ida:** I was cold.



Courtesy Nightwood Theatre

Kim Renders as Luke/Lucy and Maureen White as Ida

Place: ShirI's Claresholm Esso, just beyond Crow's Nest Pass on the Kimberley-Calgary truck route.

Ida Johnson, small town waitress, serves a trucker. Enter ShirI, keeping up a steady patter of mindless anecdote. The atmosphere has the casual and relaxed feeling of any truckstop preparing for the breakfast rush. Ida fits right into the scene with a rather bored, blank expression.

The trucker tells the story of picking up a strange, half-dead hitchhiker, setting the stage for the entry of Luke, a young boy. "Luke's" presence contrasts sharply with the general cafe mood; his eyes are intense, his manner withdrawn, his fatigue obvious.

Thus, the two protagonists of the play (for Luke is Lucy adopting a masculine persona) are introduced in this natural setting. We decided to use the cafe as a kind of home-base for all the action in the play. Our set was an expanded cafe in which scenes could take place in selected lit areas, allowing us to move smoothly from an incident in Ida's life to one of Lucy's in a cross-fade. This gave us the freedom to portray the lives of Lucy and Ida from Longview, Alberta all the way to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Still, the structure of the cafe served as a unifying element, keeping the play rooted to the present.

The Contract to Tell the Story

Luke: . . . I want you to talk to me. Tell me about yourself — everything, from beginning to end . . . will you?

Ida: Hell, what's it worth?

Luke: Name your price.

Ida: I'll talk your ear off for twenty.

Luke: It's a deal, but I want the truth.

Ida: Sure thing honey.

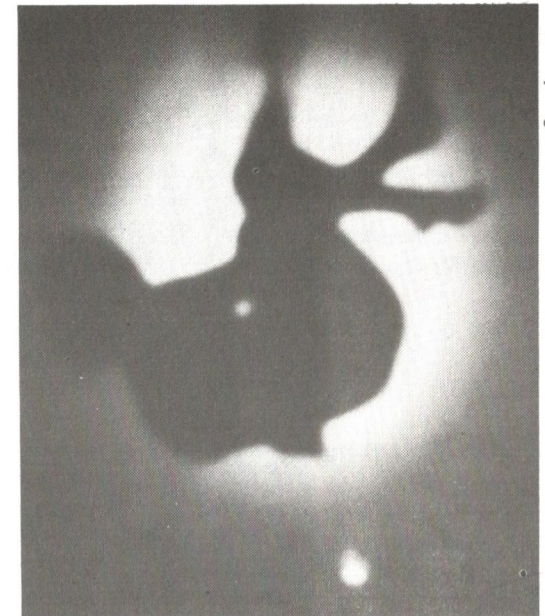
(dissolve cafe)

This first encounter between Ida and Luke (Lucy) sets up the premise for the entire play. An incredible tension is created between these two characters; the audience senses something happening between them. Earlier, a monologue delivered by Luke in a kind of frozen moment (staged as if a camera zoomed in for a close-up on one character while the scene moved in on the background) has indicated a connection to Ida, albeit an ambiguous one. The aura of mystery surrounding the relationship between these two people in the book remains to the final pages; on stage, though, the same actor is inevitably recognized as Luke and Lucy and therefore makes obvious the single identity of the two characters. From here, we leave the cafe and the two stories unfold.

Slide: Longview escapes the prairie by twenty miles and the mountain by twenty-five. It alters the minds of passers-through like an empty but unforgettable dream of nothing in particular. The inhabitants number anywhere from a hundred to a hundred and twenty depending on the season and the inclination of a very few to leave. Almost everybody stays.

It's a children's paradise but time eats children.

Introduction to Lucy



Courtesy Nightwood Theatre

Aside from her entrance into the cafe as Luke, our introduction of Lucy showed her in larger-than-life proportions: a silhouetted figure swinging on a trapeze. The effect was created with the aid of a huge cyclorama (essentially, a transparent cloth) and back lighting. This device was used periodically in the play, at times where we felt Lucy's presence was needed in a strong, non-verbal, rather impressionistic manner.

Moving in her own world of isolation, high and distant, but eerily present as a spiritual force at crucial moments in Ida's life, Lucy took on mystic proportions.

Slide: I am frozen in loneliness.
Only fools and goats climb so high.

Ida's direct, down-to-earth and intimate rapport with the audience contrasted and heightened Lucy's colder and more distanced picture. These two styles worked well on stage in juxtaposition.

Each cyclorama image of Lucy was accompanied by a repetitive piece of music (in the tradition of Phillip Glass) as a theme for her character. This thematic music, the "Lucy theme," was a dominant element underpinning the piece, since it could be introduced during transitions from one Ida scene to another, maintaining Lucy's haunting presence. The music and silhouette images became abstractions of Lucy's character.



Robbie O'Neil, Maureen White, Mary Vingoe

Wedding Photo

Slide: Ida got married because she had to. No one was surprised. Statistics indicate that the last time a local girl got married for reasons less well-defined was in 1948 and she (Rosalind Clark was her name) was explained away after losing her marbles in '49.

This slide, projected onto the cyclorama, was the introduction to a sequence of scenes which we had developed in the early stages at CinemaLumiere. Ida's actual wedding was depicted in a set of six freezes with Ida and her parents — the prototypical wedding portraits. Each freeze was punctuated by the flash of a photographer's flash cube. A slow, metronome-like drumbeat maintained an eerie tension throughout the series. One the last photo-freeze, the lights went from a flash to a yellow dim and the miked voice of Lucy/Luke was heard as the image lingered:

Lucy: "... I was at your wedding Ida, but you wouldn't have noticed me in that cast of thousands. In Longview they do it up right. You even made a special trip all the way to Calgary for your wedding dress — a lace on silk on satin over your swelling belly ..."

Subsequent to the voice-over, the freeze broke, leaving Ida alone on stage with her rather bitter account of the wedding night with Derek.

Ida: "... I just got the light on and Derek grabbed my neck and said suck me off so I did with my going-away suit on and everything but he couldn't come and my jaw hurt so I had to cry some but he just shoved it in further and finally he came though with somewhat of a whimper if I do say so myself."

Carol and Ida at Home

Carol: Remember the time you went off the pill and didn't tell Derek?

Ida: Yea. I just decided to have another kid, that's all.

Carol: But you didn't tell him! He almost killed the druggist. Well, you might as well have two kids as one.

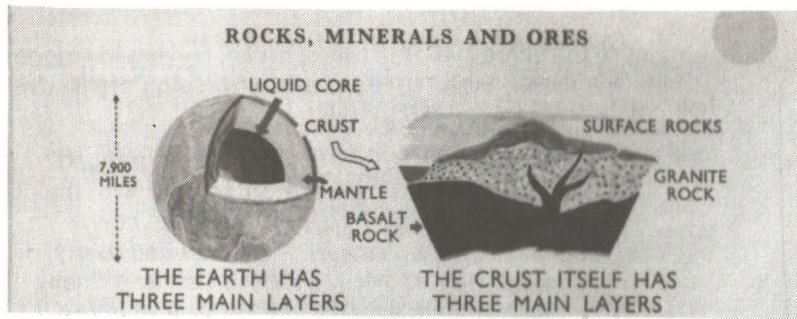
Ida: Anyways, I like Danny better than Deb, kinda like he was my own idea or something.

This scene between the two housewives was situated on a sofa very close to the audience. They folded laundry, watched a soap opera and gossiped about their kids, the people on TV, the latest horror show at the Drive-In, the usual. The scene was intimate and funny.

Scenes like this often ended with Ida alone on stage delivering a retrospective account of that time in her life in monologues taken directly from Riis' novel. Though Ida often gave the impression of being "stupid," these insights into her own past added a depth to her character that was intriguing. Her simplicity became her charm.

Although we gave Lucy a voice, she did not speak with the same easy warmth as Ida. Her language was careful and dense. More often, her philosophy was suggested visually and musically, with the frequent addition of a cryptic message (a Riis aphorism) projected on a slide.

Slide: Everyone decides once. A very few choose to choose. The rest choose not to.



Original Scenes

Slide: a school book diagram of the various layers of the earth.

Voice-over: The earth, our planet, is a rocky world, 7,900 miles wide. It is made up of three main layers: the core, the mantle and the crust . . .

Enter Lucy, barefoot and sullen in a small lit area Centre Stage. The lesson breaks off and the voice of the teacher, Miss Bird, continues in a different tone.

Voice-over: I asked Lucy if she would like to become a nurse's aid some day. She replied that she would rather sell cunt in Calgary as it brought in more money. I have never been so astonished in all my life, not in all my life.

This slide, with the accompanying teacher's voice, was always met with laughter from the audience because of its unexpectedness and the prudish attitude of the teacher.

The scene was one of a few in the play which illustrated our departure from the novel. In it, we succeeded in introducing Lucy to society, showing her awareness of her position in that society and the defiance of her interaction with others. Thus, we condensed several passages of third person description of her youth from the novel into one brief moment.

Similarly, we created scenes for Ida. In the novel, Riis describes Ida's encounter with a university professor over a number of pages. We transformed this encounter into a single scene between two people absorbed in their separate realities — the impotent visionary intellectual and our prosaic waitress (whom he renamed Rosa). The scene was followed by an Ida monologue about the professor's eventual suicide.

Ida:

" . . . It's too bad that he pissed off for good like that. I got a note. It said, 'I did it. Fuck you Rosa.' He drove off a mountain . . . I felt somewhat sad as he had been such good company, but it was probably the best thing for him so I was happy in that. It was too bad about that note though. It really wrecked everything. It really got me down."

As well as the creation of new scenes, we wrote original monologues for Lucy as there was little from the descriptive narrative passages about her in the novel that could be spoken. One such creation was Lucy's memory of the fishing boats, ". . . far away from everything, far away from the lights, from people, out in the black. Sometimes you couldn't tell where the sky ended and the sea began." This enabled Lucy to speak directly to the audience, thereby removing some of the distance and humanizing her bizarre life experiences.

Munich Beerhall



Lee Wildgen, Mary Vingoe, Maureen White, Kim Renders

Four masked actors appear on stage and seat themselves around a table, beer steins in hand. A macabre theme underlines a series of comic tableaux in the atmosphere of a German beerhall. The maskers leave the stage after a drunken brawl, the lights go dim, the music changes and Lucy/Luke appears clothed in a suit.

She stands in a spotlight, at once the daring performer and the disillusioned spectator. She sings of the "bitter-sweet applause." This song of power and control does admit that in the end the crowds and spotlight are not enough:

Lucy: "As you turn to leave,
You try to force a smile,
As if to compensate
Then you break down and cry."

Ida's Audition

Music played an important part in this scene as it created the mood change from the maskers to Lucy. We did, however, go one step further in a scene involving Ida in which the musicians themselves became characters in the scene. Ida tells the audience:

Ida: "What I really wanted bad was to be a singer in a band. It's not that my voice was that great, but I had all the moves down pat as I used to practise everyday in front of a mirror . . . The funny thing is, I ran into Dave Shields one day and he said they were getting a band together and did I want to try out so I said 'Sure. Why not?'"

On a "one, two, three" from Dave, Ida sang "Your Cheatin Heart" (like a real pro if you asked her).

The musicians egged her on, telling her to sing louder, pick up the tempo, and finally to sex it up a bit. What a sight — every small-town girl's dream played out by one off-key, self-conscious Ida Johnson!

These two songs clearly defined the differences between the two characters at climactic points in their lives. Because the Second Act dealt with the adult experiences of Lucy and Ida, the whole rhythm of this act was more intense and extreme with a rapid movement back and forth between the two characters' stories.

Epilogue *(simultaneously)*

Documentary Voice Over:

On the morning of October 15, 1965 Ida took Debbie and the baby over to her Mom's house where she did a wash and drank four cups of coffee. It was a cold clear bright day with a high of 36 degrees Fahrenheit. She brought the kids home for lunch: she and Deb had Kraft dinner and Cokes; Danny had Gerber carrots and a bottle . . . After putting them to bed she watched *As The World Turns* on TV and asked Carole over for coffee. Carole gave her an oven mitt as a birthday gift and stayed with the kids while Ida collected her dried laundry.

Derek came home for supper at five and they had sirloin steak for supper. Ida and Debbie ate butterscotch pudding for desert. Derek declined the pudding, drank a quart of milk straight from the carton, told Ida she was getting fat again, then left to play hockey (defence) in High River.

Ida ironed until nine and let the kids stay up with her for company . . . After putting them to bed she watched part of a variety show from Calgary and at last the movie which she thinks was funny but can't remember for sure. Derek came home just as it

Ida:

I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking Ida dear Ida dear Ida like an old crazy stuck record . . . and the wind goddamned Alberta wind blowing cans around the incinerator and a door somewhere banging like a song.

There was no moon. I went outside thinking I heard someone call. Well I don't know what with that wind . . . Still, somebody calling me . . . Ida . . . Ida. Like a whisper so it's stupid to think. In all that wind who could hear a whisper?

I thought it was Lucy. The black scared me and the wind and the sounds I couldn't see.

Then suddenly everything was still and clear, fear lifting like a fog . . . I killed him first. Quick . . . Not a sound. A clear clean perfect slice down through the throat past the throat not quite through.

Documentary Voice Over:

ended. He'd been drinking but not much; they had coffee and he told her about the game. He gave her a Borg jacket for her birthday. She exclaimed over it for him, then had one panic-sticken moment when she thought she'd run out of cigarettes but Derek saved the day by bringing a whole carton in from the car. They each had another smoke before getting into bed. Ida thought Derek seemed depressed and suggested they make love to thank him properly for the jacket. They did: Ida on top. It took a long time but it was alright. Derek kissed her and said she wasn't really getting fat . . . She had another cigarette. Derek fell asleep . . . Ida can't remember if she slept in the meantime or not but at four she thought she heard someone outside.

She put Derek's coat on and opened the door. There was no one there but she sensed otherwise and went right out into the dark.

There was a terrific blast and the trailer was a ball of flame . . . Somebody said "Don't cry Ida" but she didn't understand because she wasn't crying.

Sharon Riis' novel was adapted for the theatre by Christa Van Daele, Cynthia Grant, Maureen White, Kim Renders and Mary Vingoe. Nightwood Theatre's production of The True Story of Ida Johnson was first produced at N.D.W.T. with Lee Wildgen playing the male roles and original music by Gordon Braun-Woodbury.

Ida:

Clean. And his blood so red and thick I didn't know. I kissed him . . . Blood thick in my mouth and my nose, in my hair. Thick and red and good.

The babies. Clean quick slice slice like a butcher. I'm a butcher.

Everything red and clear as a bell. . . . I turned the gas on . . . I had a shower and set my hair. I did a manicure under the dryer. Clean nightgown

white and crisp and cool

Derek's coat, matches and a pack of Players in the pocket.

Outside.

I lit a smoke and threw it in through the door. The sky was red and clear as a bell.

Ridinghood Remembered

Polly Fleck

I saw a young woman in a red cape, I
saw that she was
bundled from her fearful redridinghood, basketted
apples folded into her mother's good pastry opaques
home truths in epigrammatic wrappers
love in a turned phrase
contained — toward her chaste grandmotherhood
wolf-edible through the great woods
she goes to find the feverish wolf-consumed old lady. She finds
wolf-hunger and the pastoral feast
of tree-ripe fruit before it falls too
compelling and the beast-prince too comely
his legs are like young trees and his
head reaches up to the sky's dome.
She lingers into darkness. She
loses her way out of the sinistering
forest she hopes that the woodsman
if he exists and if
still
he
rises before the shattering
dawn might find her and bring her home
She is deeper into the woods than I am, she
calls her wolf and her woodman brothers, she counts
on them sharing the same house in
the end at the edge until the
redhooded granddaughter comes through
the green
woods
Eden, Edendor, now deserted, now desert.



Heather Graham

Introduction to Photograms

Nina Levitt

There are many ways to read a mistake: as something (either technical and/or conceptual) that detracts from the desired image or as the nucleus of a new idea — half conscious, half unconscious — that draws attention to itself as something potentially fascinating.

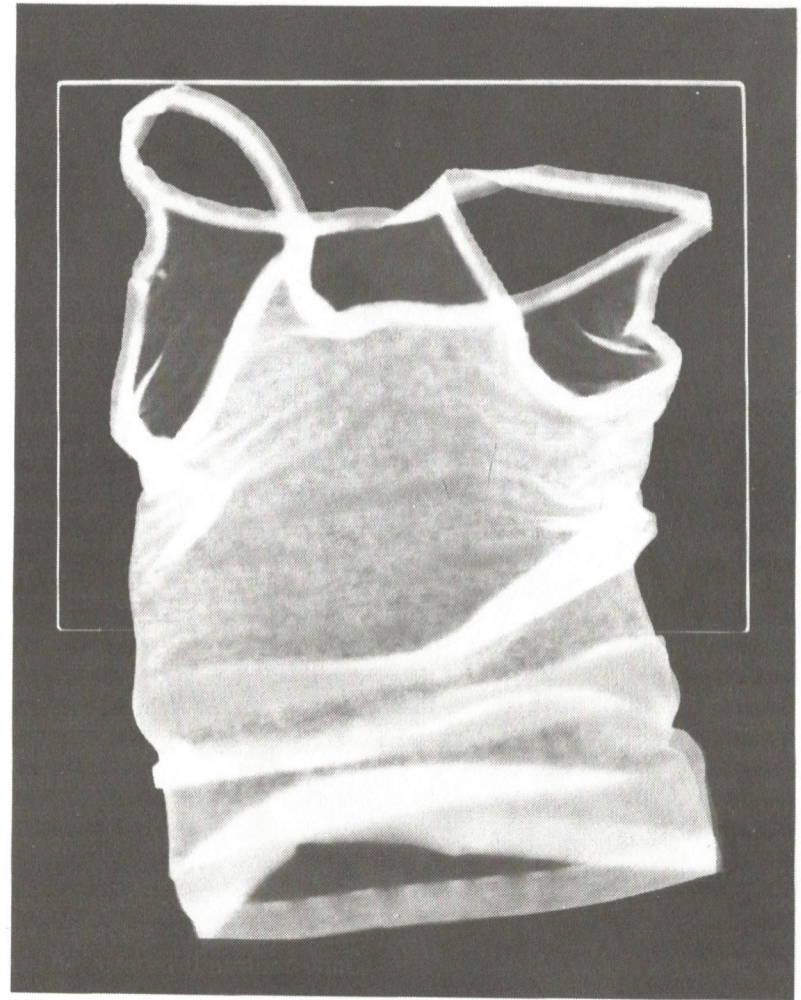
I began making *photograms* after having worked for some time on collages made and photographed on a copy stand. This work consisted of assembling various objects (such as family snap shots, photographs from magazines, polaroids, acetate grids, pieces of fabric . . .) within a circumscribed area; this circumscribed area was determined by a sheet of glass used to secure the final construction. When photographing these collages, I was careful to exclude both the edges of the sheet of glass and what lay beyond.

On one contact sheet, I noticed that I had over-framed the image. That is, I had inadvertently included the entire sheet of glass in the photograph. The result of this mistake was an image that read as a frame within a frame. Although this concept was present in my collages, I never thought about developing it as anything other than a structural device. Using error as a catalyst, I began to think of the frame in terms of content and subject matter and how this could enhance the structural aspect.

This is when I began to do the series I'm presently working on. I decided to combine the frame with a subject I had been exploring for the past few years. Photograms offered the most successful resolution.

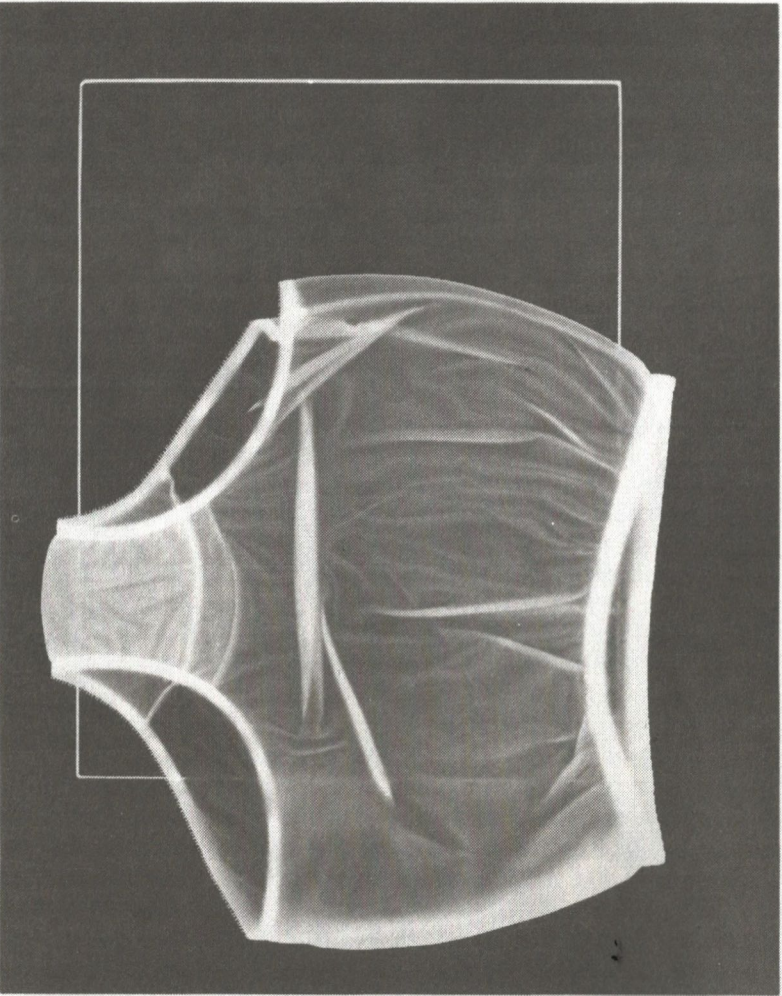
Photograms are distinguished from traditional photographs in the following ways: each image is unique, as the production of a photogram excludes the production of a negative, and there is no indication within the photogram itself as to where the light source originates.

These photograms were originally done in colour.



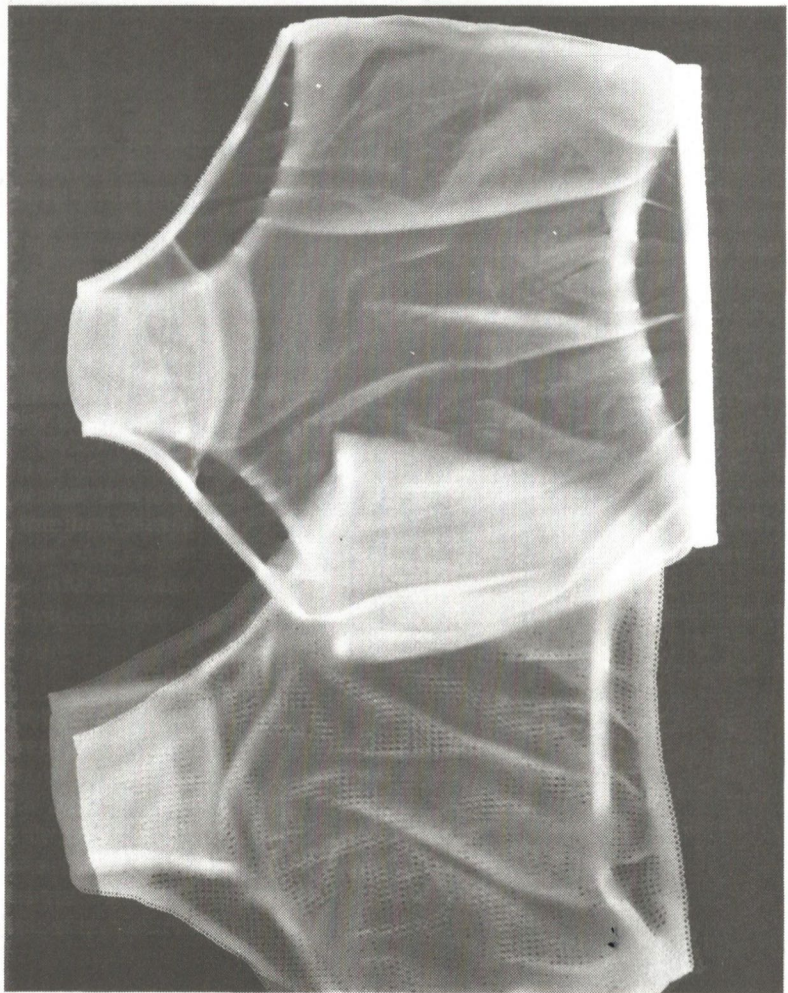
Untitled, 16" X 20" full-colour photogram

Untitled, 16" X 20" full-colour photograph

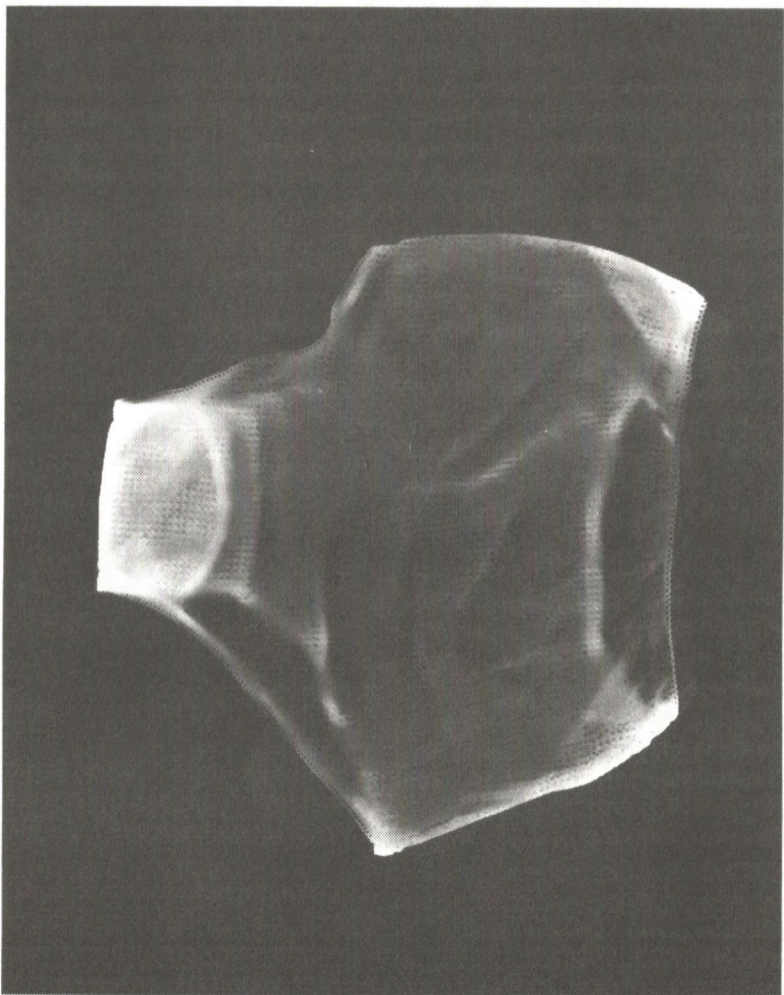


Untitled, 16" X 20" full-colour photograph





Untitled, 16" X 20" full-colour photograph



Untitled, 16" X 20" full-colour photograph

MAMA QUILLA LOVES

ROCK AND ROLL

The Mama Quilla Collective

(Beer commercial music...)

Announcer: "For the last two years now, Linda and the girls have been getting together to play a little rock and roll..."

An unlikely scenario, you say? Definitely so for Molson's, but not for *Mama Quilla II*. We are a group of seven women musicians, two sound crew members (and recently a road manager) who have been working together over the past two years to bring a woman's presence to rock music. What we are hoping to develop through our efforts is a music which is vital and energetic and which has something to say about the world — about the violence and sexism women encounter every day at every level, especially in the macho world of rock and roll. Our music is also about the power and energy women have to transform the world.

Women have been involved in rock music for years, but have had a difficult time being taken seriously, especially as musicians. The macho beer commercial mentality that would exclude "Linda and the girls" from any consideration pervades the rock industry. Women have participated largely as vocalists and have been packaged as sex objects fronting male bands. Women musicians have had to work their way through as novelty acts, in sometimes topless "girlie bands," and have been valued more for being cute or sexy than for being good musicians. The few all-woman bands who

managed to challenge the stereotypes to some degree, like *Fanny* and *Birthe* in the late sixties and early seventies, have been all but buried in musical history. Too often the only road to success was to conform to the (male) music industry promoter's idea of how a woman should look and sound. Roles were and still are quite clearly defined: it is acceptable for a woman to sing, maybe shake a tambourine, look sexy, but not to come on *too* strong. For men, macho swagger, aggressive and often violent sexuality and gigantic egos are acceptable, and flashy musicianship gets quick recognition. Rock music is a highly competitive field, and there has been a less than subtle effort to edge women out of the competition. Intimidation tactics — from mystification regarding technique and electronic technology to sexual put-downs — have typically been the experience of women players.

Many women musicians have avoided rock for the above reasons, gravitating to other musical idioms — folk, classical, jazz. The "women's music movement," which has emerged out of the women's movement of the last ten years, has generally maintained an unspoken prejudice against rock music; many feel that rock is too inherently sexist for women to reclaim. Yet rock's origin is the blues, and the blues idiom was spawned and developed by women like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Koko Taylor, Sippie Wallace,



Ooh, Mama Quilla!

Courtesy: Adam

Big Mama Thorton. To discard rock is, ultimately, to discard that tradition — and the central part these strong women played in it. The way that women have been allowed to participate in rock should be challenged, but sexism is not intrinsic to the form of music itself. Women can transform rock by recognizing and rediscovering those women who have come before us, and by adding our own life experiences and our own approaches to music — which differ from men's — to rock. We of *Mama Quilla II* see this as one of our fundamental goals.

Musically, women are gaining confidence to express the part of themselves that is "raunch." For many women performers it's been difficult to get in touch with all aspects of themselves, because conforming to the expected model requires a great deal of self-repression. Over the last few years there's been a reaction, largely spawned by the emergence of Punk and New Wave music, against "wimpy" feminine stereotypes. However, it's resulted in women bending over backwards to the other extreme: to be tough, to deny any vulnerability, to be as "macho" as the guys. Rock music is a strong expression of emotions, and it requires a lot of direct, up-front physical and psychic energy. Performing as a rock and roll band is totally different from performing other forms of music because of the amount of "swagger" involved. Women aren't used to feeling comfortable with that laid-back, "strut your stuff" style of performance; we're not used to feeling the particular kind of self-confidence it requires to begin with. So many times in the past we've been forced to "strut our stuff" in a different way, as sexual objects: not for ourselves, for others. But to perform rock as energetic, self-respecting, strong women is an incredible way of putting ourselves in touch with our bodies; the women in the audience also begin to loosen up. Together we share something that's very exciting, very incendiary.

If there are few women musicians in rock, there are even fewer involved in the industry, as producers, as promoters and agents, as sound engineers. We are starting to see some female artists producing their own albums. Genya Ravan has been producing herself as well as other artists for a while, and recently, Lene Lovich has been the producer of her albums. The recent move in rock toward independent production and smaller labels, and away from the huge multinational recording companies may prove ultimately helpful to women by allowing them more control over production, packaging and promotion of their music.

This trend also suggests some interesting economic options for women performers, and ways in which the exploitative Big Business of Rock could be challenged. The big recording companies are having a great deal of economic difficulty at present as a result of having over-extended themselves. Performers are turned

Women aren't used to feeling comfortable with that "strut your stuff" style of performance. In the past . . . we've been forced to strut our stuff as sexual objects.

into mere commodities. This is even more true in the case of women, who are more blatantly exploited. The industry has done a very good job of brainwashing the musicians, as well as of controlling many of the channels to economic survival: clubs and concert bookings, promotion, distribution, etc. But there are presently a few musicians and a few small record companies who are trying to forge alternatives and are managing to survive: Olivia Records, an independent, women-owned, women-run company, for example. Olivia is more concerned with finding and recording good women musicians, treating them and every woman who works to the company fairly, than with hype and Lear jets. It's a viable and realistic way of creating music and developing recording industry skills for women. Women musicians can help build our own companies, collectives, and thus take power to do what we want. We now have the experience in working for our visions, and are learning how to operate practically. As we look to the future, the realm of the possible seems much bigger than it did ten years ago.

As a band *Mama Quilla II* is interested in all of these possibilities. We would like to encourage more women to get into rock as musicians; we'd like to think of women in high school getting together to form their own basement bands. As feminists we have a vision of a new world; we feel that rock music is a vehicle for social change, and we try to infuse our music with the values and energy of the new era we hope to see.

Scenes from Erika Ritter's Automatic Pilot

The two women who dash through Erika Ritter's comedies The Splits and Automatic Pilot are both young, ambitious and endlessly involved with ex-husbands, lovers and would-be mentors. They smoke too much, pop pills, booze, and find that their work is easier to handle than relationships. Megan in The Splits (Toronto Free Theatre, 1978) is a self-described "ex-coed who boycotts fur coats and helps lost puppies find their way home," and who seems condemned to writing sit-coms for the CBC and kowtowing to the men in her life. But one fine day, Megan figuratively steps into a phone booth and comes out — not superwoman — but surer of her own identity than she's been in her life. As she says before she dumps them all, "I am me and I'm not here to be sliced up into pieces at someone else's whim." She dumps her shrink and his little pink pills and then quietly exits with her new best friend — her typewriter.

In Automatic Pilot (New Theatre, January 1980), Charlie is an older, wearier version of Megan; a CBC soap writer who plunges into the roller coaster world of stand-up comedy at the "Canada Goose," a club based on Toronto's Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabaret. Her interludes with the opposite sex usually end up in drunken stupors (after one all-nighter with a lady killer named Nick she's in such a daze that she mistakenly thinks his younger brother, Gene, was the man she bedded) but it's all fodder for her comedy mill. That is, un-

til she and Gene fall in love and set up housekeeping. Within a month Charlie is languishing over a typewriter, struggling in vain to come up with "new stuff" for her act. Gene, she discovers, may be good for her but, when all is said and done, goodness does not get a laugh at the Canada Goose. Painful as it is, she and Gene break up. Failure, not success, is the muse of her humor.

Like her character, Ritter is up-tempo and funny. Her women are obviously biographical, a fact she's never denied although she adds that she's invented as much as she's lived through. In 1974, Ritter left a secure teaching position at Loyola College in Montreal to give writing a "do or die shot." Today she's become Canada's brightest comic writer.

The following four scenes are excerpts from Automatic Pilot. In the first and third, Charlie performs stand-up routines; in the second, after being dumped by Nick, she tries to explain her relationship to her work; and in the final excerpt, the last scene in the play, Gene begins to understand their break-up from Charlie's point of view.

© 1979 Erika Ritter. The complete script is available from Playwrights Canada, 8 York Street, Toronto, Ontario.



Fiona Reid as Charlie in 'Automatic Pilot'

Andrew Oxenham

“Bitsy”

(Lights come up on the Canada Goose comedy club. Charlie wears the now habitual uniform of her performance — her glasses, jacket, scarf, and brooches.)

Charlie: *(walking with the mike)* No, I'm serious. I always wanted to be one of those teensy little girls. The kind whose nickname is “Bitsy.” You know the kind I mean? The kind of girl I lend a bracelet to, and she wears it as a belt. In spike heels, standing on a stepladder, she comes up to her boyfriend's kneecap, right? Meanwhile I go around in Roots shoes in a semi-crouch and *still* when men approach me, it's only to ask if I can reach them something off the top shelf in the supermarket. I'm the type they refer to as “sturdy.” Which means porters in airports tip *me* to carry *their* luggage.

Helpless. That was always my goal in life. To be helpless. Helpless and sweet and quiet. Like Bitsy. Bitsy never has to talk. She's mastered only one simple, basic sentence — *(imitates)* “How was your day, honey?” — and the world's beating a path to her door. I, meanwhile, am lucky if a guy ventures up my walk to read the meter. See, men just don't come on to big, capable girls, girls who speak English as though it was their native language. Especially when your voice sounds like Full Alert in the London Blitz. I ask a man if he wants to come to bed, and it sounds like a threat.

Or — I answer the phone, and you know what happens? They ask to speak to my wife. I call some guy up, and it's no better. *(imitates herself, loud and hearty)* “Hey, Brad, hope there's no hard feelings, I didn't mean to drop the Volvo on your foot. I was just horsing around. So why don't you come over? There's beer, and you can watch me take the caps off with my teeth.”

Now Bitsy has this tiny, feminine, whispering voice, right? Put *her* on the phone, man, and she gets results! *(imitates)* “Hello? Oh, hi, Brad. Dinner? No thanks. I already ate half a soda biscuit

Charlie:

and I couldn't touch another thing. I don't know if I should let you come over, either. Remember what happened last time? You hugged me and my spine broke.”

And when Bitsy goes shopping for clothes, the clerks always advise her to try the Petite section, right? I so much as try walking *into* the petite section, and they throw a cordon around the entire department and get on their bullhorns. *(imitates)* “Attention, all staff. Large person attempting entry. Large person attempting entry.” Then they send out some Munchkin to reason with me, right? *(imitates)* “Look, nothing personal, honey, but you're built like a Maytag, all right? Now, don't make trouble and go quietly to some other department. Oh, you want a cape? There may be something in Tents and Awnings.”

I guess that's why big girls hang around with married men. Married men aren't particular. In fact, they're downright grateful. And the thing I really love about married men — yes, you sir. You're married, aren't you? Your silly giggle gives you away . . . The thing I love about married men is, they go through these great guilt trips that almost pass for passion. *(imitates)* “I hate myself for doing this. My wife's a wonderful woman. It's just that she's gone off sex.” And you know, I can't imagine why. Personally, I love a man who comes in three seconds flat! Hey, you've been a great audience. Thank you and goodnight!

(black out)

“The Comic from L.A.”

(Charlie's bedroom. It's been a long night for Charlie, capping off a long day during which her current lover leaves her. His younger brother, Gene, seeking to console Charlie, finds her in a philosophical mood about herself.)

Charlie:

I was thinking tonight, about this comic they brought up from L.A. one time to headline at the Canada Goose. There was this one night, the show hadn't gone very well at all. And he invited three or four of the comics — young guys, and

Charlie: me — back to his hotel room. He said he wanted to smoke dope and forget about the way the act had gone. But you know what happened when we got back to the hotel room?

Gene: What?

Charlie: The headliner brought out the dope all right, but while the rest of us smoked it and watched the gangsters on the Late Late Show, the comic just sat in a corner, all alone, and played the tapes of his act. The room was a mess — dried up old pizza crusts and coffee cups and cigarette butts. But the comic just sat there in the mess, with a stopwatch, and a notepad, and played the tapes.

Gene: So what did the rest of you do?

Charlie: What could we do? He was the headliner from L.A. So after every line, somebody would say, "That's a funny bit, man. That's very funny." And gradually the headliner began to pay attention to the fact that we were there, and he started throwing out new lines he'd spun off from the stuff on the tape. And after every line, he'd stop and ask, "What about *that*? Could *that* be funny?" Some of it was funny and some of it wasn't, but we told him it was dynamite and he wrote it down. I think that he was afraid that if he stopped, he'd die. You know, the way a shark has to keep moving or die? I think he was afraid that if he stopped, he'd be consumed by the garbage in the hotel room, or the ambition of the young comics coming up behind him, or the brutality of the Late Late Show.

Gene: But he was the one who messed up the room. He was the one who invited you in, and turned on the TV.

Charlie: That's right. *(pause)* I wonder. Maybe he actually *needed* the awfulness around him for incentive. Maybe he needed someplace like that, that he *had* to be funny in or die.

Gene: Could be.

Charlie: So, maybe this is no time for *me* to stop. Maybe I've got to keep going now, or die.

(Gene clicks on the tape recorder, speaks into the mike)

Gene: Charlie, you're not going to die. Not tonight, anyway. *(clicks it off)* There. Now you've got it on tape. Play it back whenever you need reassurance.

Charlie: That's the worst part of being a comedian. Everybody just laughs at you. *(as Gene laughs)* See what I mean?



Fiona Reid with Geoffery Bowes as Gene

Andrew Oxenham

“Younger Men”

(Some weeks later. Charlie has just left her younger man, Gene, or ‘Sonny,’ as she calls him. Lights up on the Canada Goose where Charlie is onstage in her customary gear plus a feather boa, with the mike in her hand.)

Charlie: Hey, has anybody seen any single — straight — guys lately? You know they’re an endangered species. In fact, I heard recently a woman was picketed on Bloor Street by the Greenpeace people for wearing a coat made of the pelts of single straight men.

Of course, there’s a big vogue now in younger men. You noticed that? I have nothing against it, but it does have its problems. For instance, it’s hard to make a good showing in a very classy restaurant when the waiter hands your escort the Child’s Menu. It’s equally hard when you try to make conversation and it turns out the kid thinks LBJ was a feminine deodorant spray. And you suspect he’s hanging out with you to get into restricted movies, right?

But the real bitch about younger men is how goddamn *earnest* they are. One roll in the hay and they’re all ready to move in. Provided you’re willing to help them with their algebra. And when you say, “Hey, wait a minute, sonny —” *(she stops in some confusion, her face goes blank for a moment, then she rallies, picks up her comic persona again)* No, I prefer to stick to single guys my own age. Even if they do have this sort of free and aloof quality that goes with an endangered species. I actually met a single guy once. First thing he said to me was “Babe—” He called all women Babe. I guess it eliminated the problem of learning names he’d only have to forget. “Babe,” he said, “I’m not into involvement.” And you know something? He wasn’t. In fact, if you called when he was out, there was this message on his answering machine: “Hi, I’m not home now. And I’m not into involvement — ever.”

But I did get to go out with him once. And he said to me, “Babe, you chicks are all the same.

Charlie: You’re takers.” Some taker. We’d been out to dinner, where we split the tab. We split a taxi to the movie, where I paid my own way, plus sprang for the popcorn. Now we’re back at my place, doing it in *my* bed, drinking *my* Scotch and smoking *my* cigarettes, and I’m a taker? What do I have to do to be a giver? Donate my kidneys?

(black out on Charlie, lights up on Gene at his desk and tape recorder)

Gene: *(into the mike)* In fiction when people split up, they never see each other again. Their farewells are conveniently followed by a blank page or a closing credit roll. In real life, it works a little differently. For a while he avoided anything or any place that reminded him of her, because fiction had taught him that was the right thing to do. But in the end, real life won out, and he went down to the club where she performed and watched her unobtrusively from the back. And while he considered the things that she said to be specious and exaggerated, he did have to concede that she seemed happier up there, telling stories that featured her as the perpetual underdog, perpetually disappointed. Because as long as there was the remotest possibility that there was something funny in it, she could go on and, in some strange way — like the headliner from L.A. she’d told him about — the awfulness was the incentive.

And as he watched her it occurred to him for the first time that perhaps he’d got what he wanted too. That losing not only makes for better prose but is, in the long run, safer than winning. Safe being a relative term, of course. There were, for instance, people who considered it unsafe to set foot in an airplane. And yet he knew for an absolute certainty that it was a hell of a lot more dangerous down on the ground.

(black out)

THE END

Erika Ritter: “The very fact that I survive is encouraging”

Constance: How are you feeling these days?

Erika: There's always a lull between the death of one play and the beginning of another. I'd like to take a break and clear my brain. I need time to think, to grow up. I've used everything I've experienced so far in my life in my plays and I'd like a chance to have some new experiences. The final conclusions in my scripts express what I know about life so far and it takes some time to move on to the next observation. When I finish something I feel like tube of toothpaste that's been squeezed completely empty.

Constance: In Automatic Pilot, Charlie's options as a woman and an artist seem to be minimal at the end of the play. Are you saying that you can either be happy and have a personal life, or be unhappy and have a creative life? Are these the choices you see for women?

Erika: Charlie's mechanisms for dealing with her personal unhappiness turned into her art . . . from irritation she created a pearl. But the mechanism becomes an insatiable machine that has to be fed with her own unhappiness. Any writer who writes personally will say they need the grit of experience to write. But then there's the question that must be answered: are you having experiences merely to have something to write about? It's a convoluted situation, though: Charlie really doesn't have a choice. She's rather unconscious about the mechanism for her creativity. If she knew how she came to write, she might not be able to.

Constance: Do you feel a lot of women are in this boat?

Erika: A lot of women artists and actors came up to me after seeing the play and said, “Hey, that's my life.” And not with a cheerful recognition. It's a problem when your work starts to use you. I wrote *Automatic Pilot* to exorcise that possibility. I always found it

The author of *Automatic Pilot* in conversation with Constance Brissenden



chilling to watch Charlie at the end of the play, up there doing her act, oblivious to what she's opted for.

Constance: Is this specific to women?

Erika: Men can identify with it too, but male artists, to me, seem to have different goals. They're working for power, prestige, ambition . . . not for escape. Women take their personal unhappiness as the energy they need to be creative. What is most personally connecting for me in the play is not, in fact, the outcome, but Charlie's resistance to being seen in terms of her work. Success creates this fear of being depersonalized, and rather than selling herself as a talented comic she negates that aspect and comes on to men either on a sexual level or as a refrigerator cleaner. That's what annoys me most and what I think is my responsibility and the responsibility of other women: we've got to get over wanting not to be thought of in terms of our work.

Constance: Are movies a direction you're considering?

Erika: I'd like to write for film but, of course, with complete artistic direction, input into filming and casting and lots of money. And any part of that in the film industry today seems like an impossible dream. The Canadian film industry is incredibly disorganized; people are like kids let loose in a candy store. There's no great artistic leadership going on; there's something unprincipled about the whole thing. If I were going to make a transition into film, I'd probably start with an adaptation of something of my own. I don't think I could be hired as a screenwriter to work on somebody else's idea.

Constance: What else do you see down the road?

Erika: I'd really like to write a novel. To write prose gives you an incredible feeling. You're not confined to a certain space with a max-

imum of four actors. You can plot a landscape as big as you like. It's more malleable. Plays have a certain rigidity, and that goes even for "experimental" works. There's only a certain kind of action and you've got to keep it clipping right along. But in fiction, there's a chance to fill out background. I must admit, however, that my short stories have a lot of dialogue. But if playwriting was the only kind of writing I did, I couldn't stand it. It's a grind.

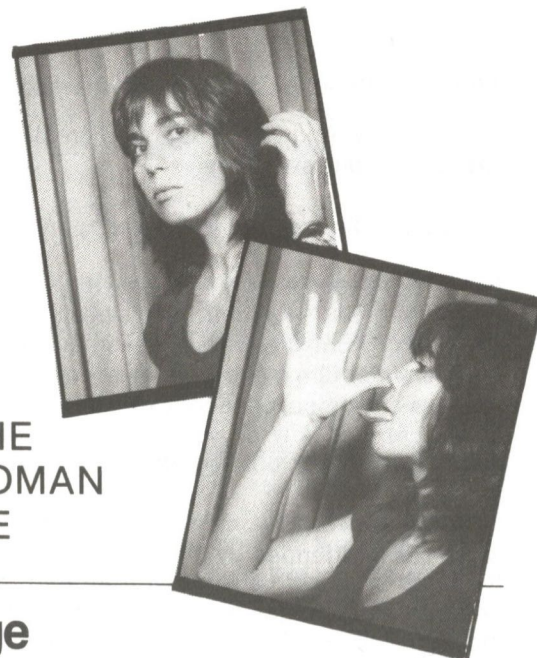
Constance: Do you have any advice for playwrights to be?

Erika: Yes. If there's anything else at all you have an aptitude to do other than write, do it. Seriously, if you have to do it, you'll do it. You don't decide to be a writer, it decides for you. I've been extremely lucky and in some ways it's all been easier than I thought it would be. The main thing I'm trying to avoid is the "career woman syndrome." You know, "I made it because I'm good and if you were good you'd be making it too." Actually, I still haven't gotten over the fact that I can make a living doing what I like in my palatial one-bedroom apartment. The very fact that I survive is encouraging.



Ellen Tornie

A scene from The Splits with Nancy Beatty, Kenneth Ryan



EXPLORING THE STATUS OF WOMAN AS SPECTACLE

Kay Armatage talks with Lorraine Segato

In the five years that Kay Armatage has been involved with film-making, she has directed four films, Jill Johnston (1977), Gertrude and Alice in Passing (1978), Bed and Sofa (1979), and Speak Body (1979). Kay teaches Film and Women's Studies at the University of Toronto. She is also a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in numerous Canadian publications and is currently in preproduction on her latest film which deals with strippers. She is interviewed for Fireweed by Lorraine Segato, filmmaker and musician. In addition to singing with Mama Quilla, and teaching a film course, Lorraine is currently working on her third film profiling Canadian feminist Pat Shultz.

Kay: To be asked about my creative process is very strange for me. I never thought of making movies until I did it, and I haven't written fiction or poetry since I was in high school. I think that this popular notion of "creativity" as some kind of inspired, rather romantic, heroic process really keeps people from doing things. And it's certainly kept women artists and women's art from being recognized a lot of the time. Because if women produce art or something that resembles art, but they produce it as part of their daily work in the home and not through some special, muse-tortured process, we tend to think of it as less-art, minor art or not-quite-art, or "just" decoration or "just" craft or . . .

Lorraine: Hobby?

Kay: Exactly. And so the notion of creativity has always seemed to me to be a bit retrogressive.

Lorraine: How then did you come to make your first film?

Kay: It happened simply by my saying, "Jill Johnston is this incredible woman: she's dynamic, she's powerful, she's a performer, she's the kind of woman you never see in the movies." The time was 1975 and feminist film makers were very concerned with presenting new images of women, ones that you didn't see in Hollywood films. And I thought, not only do you not see images like Jill Johnston's in Hollywood films, but you don't see them in most feminist films either.

There were both women and men who didn't like my film and who were really offended by Jill Johnston. It was a response I had anticipated in making a film. With all that talk of images of women and alternate images of women, the kinds of images we were seeing in the feminist films were the wonderful sort of positive role models — I've had it up to here with positive role models. I just thought there *are* some women in the world who have things to say and are great — and they're outrageous. And they're not positive role models. If anything they're the reverse... Jill Johnston stampeding through North America, just rampaging through these virginal women...

Lorraine: She has no illusions of being humble, you see. And I think she recognizes her own sense of power.

Kay: And she *is* powerful. Or was. That's what's so great about her. I'd admired her work for years, so, completely naively, I said "let's make a movie."

Lorraine: Have you ever been intimidated by the amount of technical knowledge one has to have to make a film from beginning to end?

Kay: Oh, absolutely. The one good thing we did was to get Joan Churchill to shoot it for us. Otherwise I think we would have been completely overwhelmed, because neither my partner, Lydia Wazana, nor I had ever directed a film before. Joan Churchill is one of the best *cinema verité* cinematographers in the world. She's technically perfect; she uses the camera like an eye.

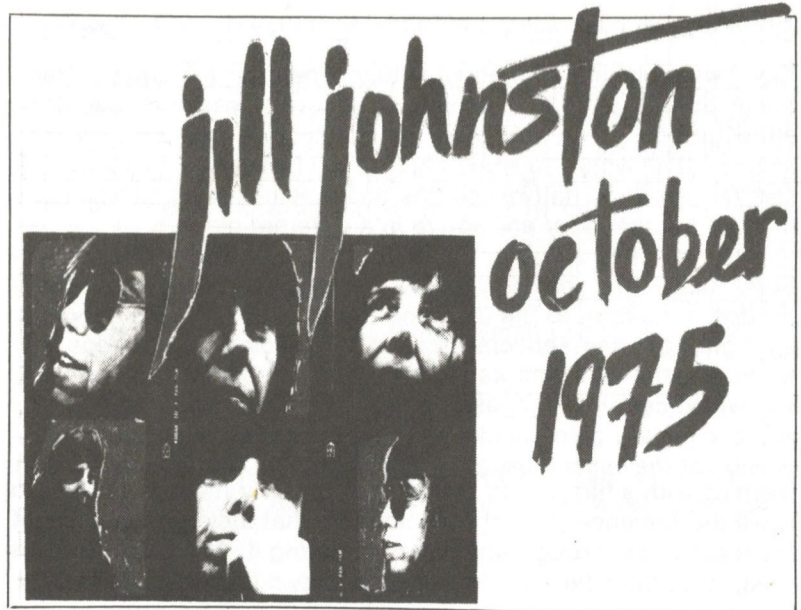
Lorraine: It seems a contradiction to think of cinema verité as being technically perfect.

Kay: I mean within the conventions of that style. Things which would be completely jarring if you saw them in Hollywood cinema or even a TV drama are perfectly acceptable in *cinema verité*. When I say technically perfect, I mean that when she does a crash zoom from a wide shot to a close up — I mean she's looking through the camera — she ends up *that* close, perfectly framed and perfectly in focus.

Lorraine: I've seen the technology intimidate and polarize women. That struggle, you know: "Should I finish this? Should I try anything this ambitious?"

Kay: Yes. That was one bone of contention between Lydia and me. Lydia had worked in film, she was a trainee sound editor (she's a very good sound cutter now), and she had a sense of the technology and the technical skill involved in making films. I think that she shared the feeling of a lot of people who know about this technical side; I don't mean to put them down, but there's a kind of "technicist macho" which says: "This is something special and you can't learn it." Since all the technology in my experience has always been relatively simple — whether it was fixing the toaster or the tap, or understanding how a car worked — I of course had the opposite feeling. I thought there was no reason in the world why I couldn't learn what was involved in making films.

Lorraine: And that was your first film?



Kay: Yes. *Jill Johnston* was a \$20,000 half-hour film. It was long. And ambitious. It took us a very long time to do because we ran out of money after the shoot. And we were turned down by the Canada Council for funds so it was a good year and a half after we finished shooting before we finally got the film finished.

Lorraine: Very rarely do you see films which combine art and politics in as perfect a blend as Speak Body. How did you come to make that film?

Kay: After working on the Jill Johnston film I became dissatisfied with *cinema verité*. It was not coincidental, of course, that all the major feminist film theorists in the world were also turning away from *cinema verité* at the same time. With the next three films I was interested in working out some theoretical cinematic problems, and one of the things I wanted to do in *Speak Body* was to represent strictly a woman's point of view. There's a bracket at the beginning and the end; when you first see the woman with her eyes down, being looked at in the highly privileged way we get to look at women in the movies; and then at the end, when she looks straight back at us, the audience. Except for that bracket the film tried to represent what she sees, or in some cases, the images in her head . . . not the exterior point of view at all, but only what was in *her* head. What a woman would be feeling, thinking, doing.

Lorraine: Did a similar theoretical problem lead you to make Bed and Sofa?

Kay: I was thinking a lot about editing. The main principle of traditional editing is that it should be more or less invisible. That although you, as an audience, are transported from one place to another, it all works so smoothly that you barely see the joins. You see the person go halfway out the door and next cut she's halfway through another door and you're in a different place.

This "invisible suturing" of classical Hollywood editing effectively keeps the spectator in a fixed and virtually unconscious position in relation to the film. And the narrative, the smoothness, the lighting . . . the *seductiveness* of the whole thing sweeps you along. The notion which was then current in feminist film criticism, and which certainly appealed to me at the time, was that if you're going to make a political film you have to somehow allow for an extension of the consciousness of the audience. That is, *not* to catch them up with a film, *not* to create an escape for them, but rather to leave the audience at least conscious of what they're seeing and of the mechanics through which they're seeing it. At a more extreme level, to let there be a confrontation between the audience and the image.

The notion in feminist film criticism which appealed to me . . . was to leave the audience conscious of what they're seeing and of the mechanics through which they're seeing it.

So the idea of cutting from the bed to the sofa to the bed to the sofa seemed to me a way of making the editing so evident that although you wouldn't know *when* it was going to cut, you would know where it was going to cut to. It was going to be predictable, over and over again. It was a way of trying to eliminate one of the main principles by which narrative is conducted while still trying to conduct a narrative. And that narrative concerned a predicament common to many women.

Lorraine: Are you working on anything at the moment?

Kay: The idea for the film I'm planning now occurred to me last June when I heard that the strippers in Toronto were forming a union.

Lorraine: What particular aspect of this issue most interested you?

Kay: The idea seemed a combination of so many concerns that are important to women's work and what strippers have in common with other working women. It also raises the whole question of the status of women as spectacle. It's central to the job of stripping and, of course, it's central to the function of women in the movies. So put those two elements together — the cinematic issues dealing with the image of women's naked body on the screen and the social issues about women's work and how we deal with strippers as deviants — and the combination seems explosive.

Lorraine: How far along with this project are you?

Kay: Well, I started to do research and to talk to women, and everything I found out just raised more and more questions. A million problems.

Lorraine: What sort of problems?

Kay: Well, to take a central one: If you're going to make a film about stripping you presumably have to show it. And how do you show it when you know how cinema deals with women as spectacle . . . with the status of objects, things to be looked at, consumed? How do you make a feminist film showing the live performance at the basis of the profession in such a way that the audience becomes aware of what's involved in looking at women in a movie and looking at strippers. You've got to somehow make them aware of the process they're contributing to as audience of both the movie and the striptease.

Lorraine: Where do you see yourself heading in the next couple of years? Is the direction clear?

Kay: It's not clear at all. And in terms of film I've been just going from one thing to another. At this point I feel that I need to jump into bigger production. I've learned quite a lot making 7¹/₂ and 12 minute films but I need to make a long film. After I do this one on the striptease, I'd like to make a dramatic film, because working with actors is not a skill that I have now. There were really good actors both in *Gertrude and Alice* and *Bed and Sofa*, but whatever performance qualities there are in those films are completely brought to it by the people there, because I've never dealt with actors before. So I want to learn about that and I also want to learn about structuring dramatic films — longer ones. That'll take me well into next year, I think.



Still from 'Gertrude and Alice'

“Pulling our own strings”: Diane Michaels in conversation with Constance Brissenden

Feminists have traditionally had uncomfortable and ambiguous feelings about the subject of strippers — torn between wanting to support and assist our sisters in their struggles for improved working conditions and full legal protection, and our unwillingness to validate and reinforce a system which so blatantly exploits women, both politically and economically. Diane Michaels discusses these and other concerns from the point of view of the strippers. Diane is President of CAFE (Canadian Association of Burlesque Entertainers), an association which was set up over a year ago to represent exotic dancers in the courts and in the clubs. While the main issue for Diane has been the clarification of the laws under which strippers work, (particularly Section 179 of the Criminal Code under which dancers can be charged for performing nude or being so clad as to offend public decency or order) CAFE also intends to provide an effective health and welfare programme for its members. Diane Michaels is interviewed for Fireweed by Constance Brissenden, a Toronto free lance writer, researcher and editor who is a specialist on the performing arts in Canada.

Constance: Can you describe a good work day?

Diane: (If you) take a good day . . . Not Monday, and maybe it's Friday, but usually Thursday — and nobody's bothered you so far. The people have been nice. The conditions are good — the dressing rooms are okay, you can sit down, you can see yourself in the mirror. You get changed for your show, you go on stage. It just goes according to schedule and you are able to use your own music and they actually have lights. And the stage doesn't have any big holes in it or it hasn't been a waxed that morning — I think they wax it on purpose sometimes. It's a wonder they don't hand you your skates when you walk in.

You finish your show without any incidents. The audience doesn't make any rude comments, they are appreciative, the boss isn't jacking off in the corner. You go to your dressing room and it's warm and comfortable.

Constance: And a bad day . . . how would you describe that?

Diane: A bad day is when your boss is on your back from the moment you walk in and your contract isn't being filled properly. The dressing room is the pits or it's freezing — impossible to work in. When the boss shows it to you he takes you down a 90° angle, open staircase into the basement with mousetraps all over the place and you know they really do have mice, they're not messing around with preventative measures. You have to hang your clothes on electrical wiring, the dressing room is very small, the mirror's broken, floors are dirty, walls are dirty. You're treated with general inhumanity by the waiters and waitresses, the bartender — you don't get served, you're told to pay for your pop, they don't have any coffee and there's no food. The audience is half asleep in their chairs, literally falling out of them drunk and it's 12 o'clock — now that's a bad day, oh lord.

Constance: Do some of the club owners contribute to a bad day?

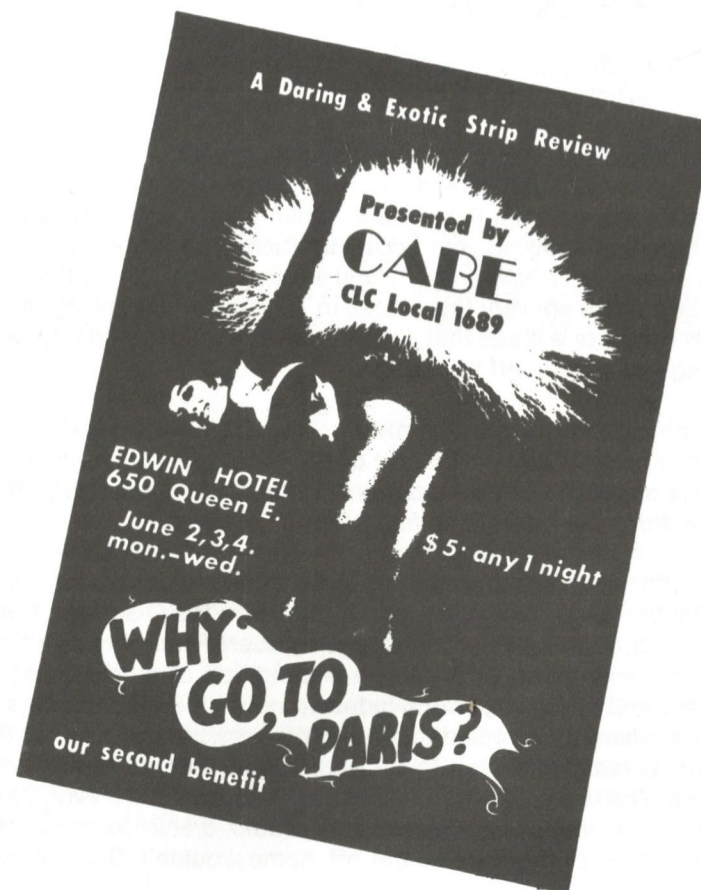
Diane: Oh definitely. Sometimes the owner will confront you with a list of rules or a fine structure. I remember walking into a place where, if you were late, you could be fined \$75. We weren't getting paid that much. If you work five days a week and four shows a day, you are making \$220 or something. For six days, six shows a day, you'll make about \$360. You might have to take your G-string off and the girl last week got busted. Or you have to take your G-string off and the girl last week got raped. Any combination of these things, just generally not all of them can happen on a bad day.

Constance: With so much wrong with the business, how can you defend it?

Diane: Well if you take a good day and you look at yourself and you look at the business and you decide whether you like that and it's already your profession — it's bearable. Obviously there are a lot of people in it — bad days don't happen to you every week. But there are circuits and there are agents and there are clubowners — specific ones who are notoriously bad business people who exploit you and who have criminal records. It's not just a labour issue — they have criminal records and they don't belong out.

Constance: Why are you stripping rather than doing more legitimate dancing?

Diane: Because I'm not a good enough dancer for that. I'm better on stage because of my personality. And I dance well but I don't dance like Karen Kain.



Constance: I know from talking to you that you think of yourself as an artist, as a dancer. Do you think that the other women that you are trying to organize in CABE have the same idea?

Diane: Undoubtedly they all think of themselves as artists and some of them may not be right about that but they've been in a situation for a number of years where they haven't been able to explore their art and people should take that into consideration. They've worked like coal miners — uncertain hours, lousy conditions and, you know, a lot of on-the-job-hazards — they feel it, and sometimes even look it in their shows. You can tell when a good idea goes blah because they never had a chance to do it. Some of them are very young and they want to be artistic. They go through a lot of pains to go that route, a lot more pains than legitimate artists because they have a lot of things in their way. Nobody expects, demands or even thinks they are capable of doing such a thing so there's a hell of a lot going against them. But the effort and the intent is certainly there with all of them.

Constance: So basically you would like to see exotic dancers improve as artists.

Diane: Have the *opportunity* to improve as artists. A lot of us have beautiful shows — with gimmicks, with choreography, whatever — that are different from the average walking back and forth across the stage and showing your body. But there's no place we can do them — we aren't paid properly and we don't have the facilities to do them. There are very few places in Toronto with a ceiling that's proper height or a stage that's more than one step off the floor and looking like a sawn-off bar table.

Constance: Most of the controversy you've been involved in this year has centred around the use of the G-string — whether or not dancers should be forced to perform without using a G-string. Why do you think the issue is so important to strippers?

Diane: It's important to the whole industry. The club owners seem to think they'll get more business if they have the G-string off and think it would be to their advantage to coerce the girls by using their jobs as a lever, or making it a condition of employment to remove the G-string or perform indecent acts. This in turn brings in the customers and intimidates the girls because it's against the law, or at least it seems to be against the law, to remove the G-string. The law is very vaguely written and from 1970 every time there's an election, you know, they would crack down on the dancers. A lot of them would get off, some wouldn't. Some would

plead guilty and of course when you plead guilty it doesn't set much of a precedent, it's only when somebody fights it that a precedent is set. Basically we tried to form a union to get rid of that element where we found we were constantly in a catch-22 situation. Either we go nude and stay employed — and maybe get busted — or we don't go nude and lose our jobs. The girls are damned if they do and damned if they don't. The police are generally saying that we are in a limbo situation and I had three girls here today who lost their jobs because they wouldn't go nude.

Constance: How would you like to see the law cleared up? Are you against total nudity?

Diane: At this time, yes. Nudity itself and for its own sake is fine, I have no objection to it. But nudity at this time in our business is inopportune in almost every sense. If the G-string is on a girl will have to have more talent to stay on the stage dancing and employed. The ones who can't improve will be forced out of the business and then the professional girls can take over and reclaim what would generally have been theirs in the first place — a well-paying job, better working conditions so you can properly execute an artistic show with some integrity, lights, sound, a stage which is solidly built, an adequately-lit dressing room. They seem like small things but most of those things we don't have now and they do contribute a great deal to your performance.

And there's no way we can ask for more money as exotic dancers without being able to hold back something. It seems to be a big thing to the club owner and so if that's what we have to hold back to be in a position to bargain for more money, that's what we should be holding back.

Constance: Sometimes when people are talking about strippers they seem to be looking down on them. Do you think that's an attitude that . . .

Diane: They look down on them because of sexual reasons, I think, more than anything else. It amazes me how so many so-called liberated people raise their eyebrows and put a big grin on their faces as soon as I tell them I'm a stripper. It's amazing how many tease you and want you to be looser. I mean even close friends. That's really unnerving because people you have known for a long time will do the same thing. When it comes right down to it, you take your clothes off in front of a lot of strange men that you don't know and that's something that they wouldn't do, that maybe they can't do, but they don't talk about that. They wouldn't do it. They are very

ardent about that. And secondly, they talk "wow, that's great," you know, "look at her, she's got so much courage, she's got so much moxy. But is she intelligent? Look at what she's doing to her life. That's a hard business you know." At which point they don't really admire her courage, they think she's stupid. Some dancers aren't courageous, some of them are stupid. A lot of them aren't. A lot of them are people just like any other person making their money and doing their thing. Some of them are quite legitimately artists and a lot of them don't find their job rewarding enough. They go on to other parts of the arts, other facets, and they do quite well.

Constance: Do you ever talk about feminism with strippers?

Diane: Yes, we do, and it's a thing we don't quite understand — why they don't like us so much — but it's pretty obvious they don't.

Constance: Why do they say that?

Diane: Because they have approached us to stop us from places where we perform. I know they probably say the industry is sexist and it exploits women, which it does. But they should also be aware that a lot of women are working in that industry and they should be concerned about what they can do to improve this situation for women.

Constance: You mean feminists should be concerned about . . .

Diane: Helping strippers. They expect us to leave the business — that's what I think they expect — to leave the business and do something else.

Constance: Do you think that feminists are criticizing the strippers but not offering a solution?

Diane: Yes, basically. I think they are making them social outcasts; they are contributing even further to any problems they do have. The feminists make it worse by isolating and alienating strippers from other women, making it difficult for them to hold their heads up, even at home.

Hard-boiled egg at the Ritz

Betsy Warland

flawlessly,
she peeled the shell off.
helpless,
bare,
she turned it within her five fingers
inspecting —
as he talked across the table.
her eyes could not leave it;
as she bit he talked faster,
as she bit an ever so slight
tremour of pleasure
ran down her body:
his talk tighter,
she ate slower
swallowing delicate smiles/
turning it tenderly she
ate the white 'til
the yellow-green ball
sat on her fingertips
his face pale with words
she was oblivious to: she ate it
in one bite.

PARCE-QUE C'EST LA NUIT...

(A PARTIR DE L'ADOLESCENCE)

conçu, réalisé,
interprété par
Chantal Beaupré
Markita Boles
Louise Laprade
Nicole Lecavalier

conçu, réalisé, dirigé par
Leo Munger

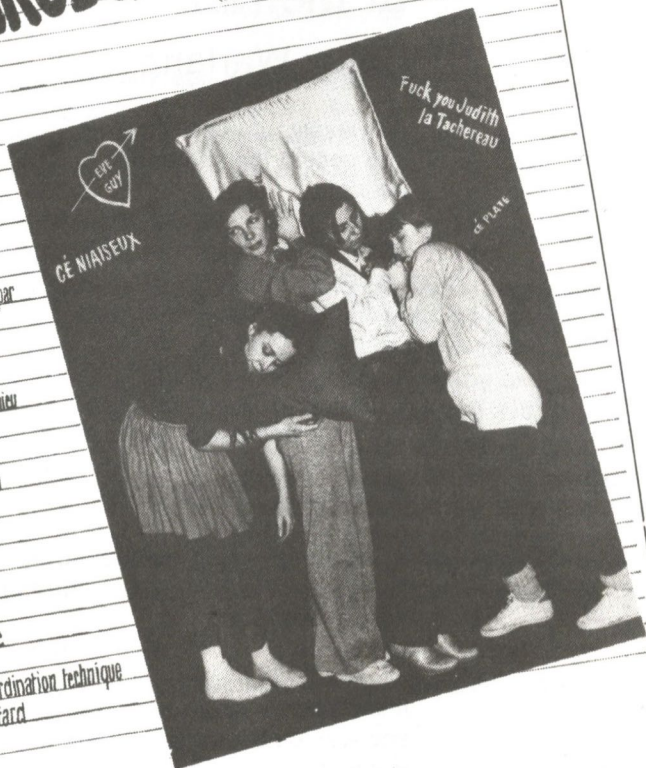
Décor et costumes
Marie-Christine Mathieu

éclairage
Dominique Gagnon

affiche
Zette Gagnon

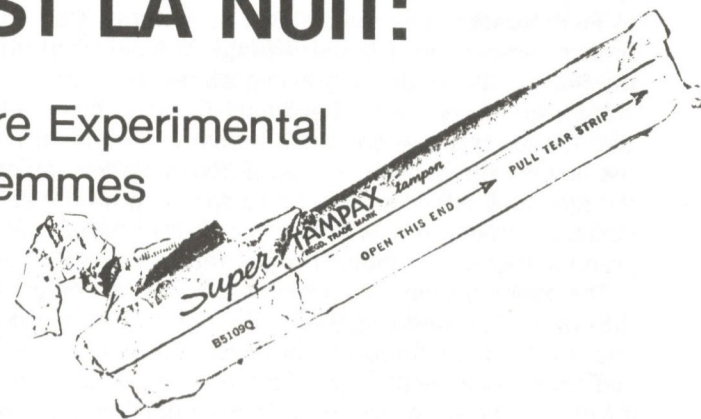
Photos
Anne Desjardis

régie et coordination technique
Alicia RonFard



PARCE-QUE C'EST LA NUIT:

Theatre Experimental
des Femmes



This review was researched with the assistance of Lyse Ponton.

by Susan Poteet

Parce que c'est la nuit is a play about adolescent violence in women. No, it's not about street gangs, drug-taking and easy sex — the media's image of the youth rebellion — but is an expression of the anger that all girls must feel as they are initiated into adulthood, a rage we are encouraged to turn on ourselves to perfect our masochism.

And yet *Parce que c'est la nuit* is fun to watch and often very funny. I went back to see it a second time and enjoyed it more, perhaps because I was less frightened by the violence.

The play was conceived and directed by the four actresses who are members of Le Theatre expérimental des femmes, a new feminist theatre, founded in Montreal in the fall of 1979. It is evident that the play grew out of improvisational work by Chantal Beaupré, Markita Boles, Louise Laprade and Nicole Lecavalier. These four actresses portray four young girls entering puberty.

The performance begins in the dark with the characters, clad in sneakers and sweat shirts, moving about the playing area in a game of tag. The lights come up on a sleeping figure covered by a red silk cloth. As she slowly awakens, she mimes a growing awareness of something wrong. She looks under her shirt. She feels wet, uncomfortable, in pain. Before she speaks we begin to remember the moment — the strangeness, discomfort, messiness. "I am sick, I am menstruating," she chants.

We called it "the curse" when I was a child, learning the expression from our mothers. It was something we hid, were ashamed of. But we bragged to our girlfriends, "I've got the curse." We don't call it "the curse" anymore, and we teach our children to look forward to menstruation as a visible sign of maturity. Can our hearty optimism remove those initial feelings of discomfort, of distress at the flowing blood, or the growing awareness that menstruation is troublesome and often disabling? Cramps, heavy bleeding, late periods. Girls are angry about menstruation. Most never express the anger, there being no accepted channels of expression. I thought "the curse" meant I had a special power, that I could put a curse on others, those who at moments I hated: my mother, my grandmother, my friends. "I've got the curse. Watch out!"

The opening scene of *Parce que c'est la nuit* creates the tone of the entire play, speaking through visual images, movements, chanting, to the deep, forgotten, or never recognized, memories of the audience: "Because it's night," the violence is expressed. "Because it's night," the actresses retire to bed, snore, giggle, smoke cigarettes, eat chips in bed, tease each other, tell secrets. "Because it's night," and we are girls, it's a slumber party. The dark night of the soul — a slumber party. Between these two poles, the action moves through a series of scenes which evoke and commemorate woman's journey through adolescence.

In an early scene, the four actresses begin a disco dance, all in perfect unison, to a song whose refrain, mindlessly repeated, is "Push, Push, in the Bush." Their faces are expressionless. Suddenly, hurled from offstage, pages from girlie magazines picturing naked women hit the actresses in the head. One actress steps out from the dance. The pages repeatedly hit her. They are thrown with great force. She begins to look at the pictures. The dance continues in the background. She mimes a confused distress, then binds her breasts very tightly in an attempt to make them go away — confusion, anger turned neatly in on herself.

The pages remain on the stage throughout the play, making it a slick, slippery surface covered with contorted pneumatic bodies. They stick to the actresses' feet, flow around when they move, silent reminders of the desirable woman. "Watch out. I'll put the curse on you."

Again, can we get back in our memories to a time when breasts were uncomfortable growths that had to be sheathed in brasieres? Why? So no one should see the breasts, only the symbolic bra? We were proud of our bras, although our mothers said lightheartedly that we didn't need them (whatever "need them" means). Boys sneaked up behind and snapped our bra straps. Fathers and brothers teased blushes out of us. "Watch out. I'll put the curse on you."

Virginity. Ah virginity. One of the actresses finds she is a snowflake, a unique snowflake. She's different from all other snowflakes. She's special. But it's cold. She's frozen, unique but alone, so alone. So she telephones for aid. Will the snowplow come? ("The snowplow came" is a Quebecois expression that girls use to indicate that they have lost their virginity.)

Love, that longed-for first romance, the feeling described in novels, films. Two actresses mime the first sexual encounter. Yearning, desire, a crescendo of feeling. But she's too small. She's left frustrated. And disillusioned. How odd that our first experience of the feeling our whole life is supposed to move towards is such a disappointment. A bad joke by a rather malignant force. Mother Nature, my mother called it. "I'll put the curse on you."

In the final scene, one of the actresses jumps up on a platform and begins to swing a five-foot broom handle around and around her head. What she is doing is very dangerous to us, the audience. She smiles a bit devilishly but swings it with greater and greater force. The audience, held captive by the protocol of the theatre (whatever they do you are supposed to sit quietly and observe), is frightened. What if the stick slips? One man afterwards joked, "Women have rather weak wrists." The actress begins to mime screams, her rage is growing, and then she mimes neatly driving the stick into herself, slowly, with great effort, placating us with a smile. She's quite funny. It's not frightening anymore. She's only pretending to hurt herself. We are back in a nice safe theatre, spectators of a play.

To end, the women begin to chant, "Imagine, the first girl on earth, profoundly happy, in love, the girl with the mother, the mother with the girl. Imagine the first girl in the world. Warlike and In Love."

I was reminded of the end of Denise Boucher's *Les fees ont soif* — "Imaginez." There is no end to this story. We are in the middle of it. But we can imagine a better world. Perhaps Mother Nature didn't write this script. Perhaps there is no script. Perhaps, after we scream our rage, we will discover there is no curse, only women, warlike and in love.

There were no teenagers in the audience. In fact, I have found teenage girls on the whole uninterested in their liberation. They are wearing bras again and as eager as ever to find a man to dominate them. Gloria Steinem says that feminism, unlike other radical movements of the twentieth century, is a movement of older, mature women. Is this a play then that can be understood and enjoyed only by those at a distance from adolescence? And perhaps, more importantly, has anything changed for the adolescent today? Are they as angry, need they be as angry, do they find and express their rage?



Talking to Pol Pelletier

Joanne Gormley

Anne Deguisse

Pol Pelletier is one of the founding members of Le Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal, one of the most innovative theatres to emerge in Quebec during the mid-seventies. Pelletier had previously worked at The National Arts Centre in Ottawa (where she was born in 1947), at Stratford, and in Toronto, where she "lived mostly in her car for about two years." It was work that brought her to Montreal, and the idea of working experimentally and autonomously within Le Théâtre Expérimental that kept her here. In this interview Pelletier reveals the story of how she came to break with that theatre and to create Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes which has since produced Célébrations, La peur surtout, and its current piece, Parce que c'est la nuit.

I met Pelletier at the theatre on Notre Dame St., above a restaurant in Old Montreal. "One of the most important love affairs in my life is with this space; we built it from nothing." It's an intimate space where the audience sits on the floor and on scaffolding. I found Pelletier in the tiny back office reading a review of Parce que c'est la nuit. She was obviously upset by the critic's statement that the company was just creating another theatre of alienation that didn't help to rectify the problems of traditional male-dominated theatre. Ironically, the critic was a woman.

Pelletier remarked that it was bad enough to be boycotted by the press — which was what usually happened — but when a critic did come and printed this kind of review, it showed how completely she misunderstood what the theatre was trying to do.

Pelletier was very enthusiastic about doing this interview for Fireweed. She was warm, energetic and generous with her responses. She spoke mostly in English and what French she used I later translated.

Joanne: Le Théâtre Experimental des Femmes was formed upon breaking with Le Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal. Can you go into some of that history?

Pol: There was a split. Things started going badly in the fall of '78. We had a number of meetings to try and clarify where we were, and where we'd come from, and they all ended just horribly — mainly because of my feminism and because I no longer wanted to work with men.

Joanne: How long had you been working with the company?

Pol: I founded the company with Jean Pierre Ronfard and Robert Gravel in April of '75. Through the years the core group grew, and more men came in. Much later, finally, another woman came in, and it was laborious, to say the least, to get this other woman in. Getting other women into the group was just impossible.

Joanne: How did the group work together?

*Pol: The first production here was *Une femme et un homme* and it was a study on male/female relationships. We all worked together — the basic group. Jean Pierre was the director, I played the woman, Robert Gravel played the man, and Pierre Pesant was the technician. But then afterwards, as the group grew, everyone sort of went off into their own interests. Each of us started doing things, and through the years I decided I didn't want to work with men anymore.*

Joanne: Do you mean that the work that you wanted to do just couldn't be done in the existing context?

Pol: That's exactly it. It took a long time. I realized that everything that was being created here had been a collective creation, and that in collective creation involving mixed groups, it was evident to me that the men led always, always, always. The women had few ideas, because they're not used to having them. The reason I have a

woman's theatre is to give women the possibility and the habit of being self-generating, creative persons, instead of sitting back and expecting men to take over.

There was a real power struggle between myself and some of the men in the group. At the beginning, there was a lot of talk about the sexes, the fact of women's oppression, etc. *Une femme et un homme* was a very revolutionary play for its time. There were certain things that I pushed; for example, I wanted a scene in which I played the man and he played the woman. So, we were pushing things, and to a certain degree the men appeared to be very open-minded. I realized through the years that they could only go a certain point. For a while they find it intellectually stimulating, as long as you remain their friend, as long as you remain more or less feminine (laughs) — o my god, how can I explain it, as long as you still please them and are there beside them — *c'est tres complexe*. In any case they find it intellectually stimulating for a certain amount of time. After that time, they find it terribly boring.

It comes to a certain point where they have to change their behaviour, and that doesn't happen because it's too painful. Why the hell should they do that? For instance, Jean Piere, because of me, realized that it was true that the theatre was led by men; that the ones who have the organizational power and the visionary power are men. So, because of me, he decided that from that point on in his life, he would always arrange, in whatever production he was in, to have an equal number of males and females. And he thinks that because he's done this now, he has solved his difficulty with "the problem of women." To go on further, which means to emotionally deal with certain things — no, that doesn't work.

Men have power, and are used to living with women who do not have power, and that's gratifying. That's the whole pattern that they find in themselves and that they like finally, even though intellectually they can say that it's wrong, and it should not happen. You listen to some man and you say "my god he's extraordinary, how wonderful," but when you work with them or live with them you find out that they cannot deal emotionally with changing things.

So, as I was saying, there was a power struggle. I was just too powerful and contested too much. Then, I retired from this theatre for about one year because I went crazy, mad — which is a typical pattern in female evolution. So, when I came back, I would tell them that all the productions that they had been doing were sexist bullshit. They weren't all bullshit, theatrically some things were interesting, but there was a lot of sexism. And it got to the point where they just didn't want to listen to me anymore. At one of the last meetings we had, one of the men said "I've had enough of feminist feedback, I do not need it, and I don't want to hear it anymore. I find it destructive."

So the image I had of myself in association with men was extremely negative, because the image that was fed back to me was "you're a black, negative, destructive force," which is very bad for your personal evolution. When you really start contesting, and saying things like "I can't work with men because I don't feel free, because what I'm searching for does not interest you, I know you're not interested. In any case, you couldn't possibly be treating these subjects because you wouldn't know what I'm talking about. You don't have the beginning of an idea of what oppression means, you do not know what fear means, what shame means, or guilt. I mean, you don't know anything about what women are feeling, and that's what interests me, so I don't want to work with you." They accepted that for a short while. There were all-female productions here before the split: *A ma mère* was one, and *Finalemant* was another. But after that it could not go much further because they could not stand sharing a space with a woman who was excluding them. Men are not used to being excluded. Women are so used to it. There are so many areas of the world which we cannot enter. But to say to a man "I don't want you in my group, you are useless to me" — *c'était inacceptable!*

Joanne: Do you think it's impossible for women who are trying to make it in a man's world to be in touch with their feelings of anger and frustration?

Pol: No, I don't think it's impossible. I think it's important for women to be in a man's world — to be *dans les lieux du pouvoir* — and we haven't got enough of them. But it's very hard on your consciousness when you do have power as a woman to maintain the consciousness that even though you have power, you're still a woman. Also, power does not make you immune to the problems that the rest of women have. I don't think it happens to all women, but there are some who would say "I'm liberated, I've never had any problems, I've never been oppressed, I have my career, men have always been perfect with me, so what are the other women shrieking about?" That's dishonest, and it's bad faith toward oneself. It's a lie I entertained for a long time. I was not going to be like other women, and I was going to live in a man's world and not have any problems because I had all the qualities necessary for living in a man's world, except that I'd keep beating my head on this fucking wall. It's not true that you can make your way and not pay. You pay dearly.

Joanne: How was the struggle in the theatre finally resolved?

Pol: It was horrible. It lasted for months because evidently

something had to be done and no one knew exactly what. Finally one day they arrived here and said that the only thing they thought they could do was to resign. The other four members left, leaving the theatre in my hands and Pierre Pesant's, who also later resigned.

Joanne: How did you form your collective here and how does it operate?

Pol: The basic structure is the same. We have a core group and decisions are made unanimously. I asked Nicole Lecavalier and Louise Laprade (the two women who worked in *A ma mère* with me) to create the new core group and we changed the name.

Joanne: Who comes to see your work? What have the audiences been like?

Pol: Mostly we get relatively young women. But we're getting more and more men and we're getting so much feedback from them. We get men saying that we have definitely changed their perceptions about women and that it has affected their lives, and we find that very gratifying. The impression we get from women is that they feel stimulated by the kind of thing we're doing; stimulated in the sense that often they say that when they leave the theatre they feel that they want to run, talk, yell; they feel propelled toward some kind of vigorous action. It's not "oh god, how horrible" — I mean it's evident that it's horrible to be a woman, but that's not enough — they've got to see that it can be undone.

Joanne: Have you made any efforts to bring this piece to adolescents?

Pol: Some teachers have been bringing small groups of students, but it's still not enough as far as I'm concerned. The thing is that for some teachers the nature of what we're doing is even difficult for them to absorb; so they're not entirely sure if they're capable of bringing their students. They're not sure how they themselves can deal with this emotionally, therefore how can they deal with whatever questions their students will have? One of our biggest problems is money and, also, that we're boycotted by the press.

Joanne: I understand that you're planning a festival?

Pol: Yes, it will be May 20 to June 3. It will bring together all the women in Quebec who have done women's theatre in Quebec in the past year or two. There's a lot happening, and people are not really aware that there is a movement — that women are spontaneously

drawing together because they want to. *Organization O, Theatre des cuisines, 3 et 7 la numera magica 8*, Louisette Dussault's one-woman show — there will be eight or nine different pieces. We are also going to solicit visual artists to participate. We want to get women to speak together about their work, so that we have some kind of exchange and mutual support. We're isolated much too much now.

Joanne: Do you hold workshops?

Pol: No, we can't. We have to be very grounded in what we ourselves are doing first. That's our priority. In any case, I'm sure we have a stimulating effect on the theatre world in general. We get a lot of young women coming out of schools who are dying to work here, and of course we can't. But if we're at least giving them the idea that it's possible to do this kind of theatre, then they can get their own stuff together.

Joanne: So you feel you are making some progress in overcoming social and cultural barriers.

Pol: Yes, very definitely. I can feel a movement coming together, and it's an extremely historical step which is very important. That women are happy to be together, and are stimulated, and are curious about what the other woman is doing — how she's working, what are her problems — and that it's all very sympathetic, is extraordinary. That's historical evolution.

Joanne: How do you see the evolution of the women's movement?

Pol: I think it has been going through a stage of recuperation. In the sixties it was very provocative. It was news, and it was shaking everyone. It was very visible, and now some things have been assimilated into general consciousness: for example, abortion; the fact that it's all right for a woman to work; that women should have more control over their bodies; that women do have sexuality. More and more women are aware that it's possible to have a fuller, richer, more autonomous life. I think we now need a second wave.

Joanne: What form do you see it taking?

Pol: I would like us to enter the stage of creation. We have to learn to propose other ways of functioning. We've talked a lot — now let's do things. It's still very marginal.

Joanne: What are the kinds of things you feel a need to do, specifically in the theatre?

Pol: There are specific themes concerning women that men don't understand, or understand badly, and the goal of our theatre is to explore these themes deeply. In *A ma mère* you have a relationship between a young girl and her mother. It's a myth about a strong woman, a warrior, an amazon, and such mythologies are very dear to me. I want to create a new mythology on the stage with female characters who live by a new code. In traditional theatre you have the usual characters: the maid, the mother, the whore, the mistress and especially the lover. It's ridiculous! A theatre like ours exists to develop images of women which are something other than those, and you have to go looking into your own experience for something to nourish new perceptions.

One of the things that strikes people the most when they come to this theatre is that they don't see traditional female images. These women move more vigorously, they're not constrained, and there's no preoccupation with seduction. The images are rather shocking because they're not familiar, and it makes some women feel very uncomfortable because they can't identify with them. Take *Les fées on soif*, which I find is horrible theatre, although I find it a very valuable and very important sociological event. What I could not believe in that thing is that it's supposedly saying things that are against women's oppression, but look at the way they are, look at the way they are dressed: — the mother in silk and velvet, her frills, her hair perfectly done, her face all made up. That's absurd. Visually, you've got all the clichés and their mouths are saying: "Well we can't have this anymore, we don't want rape." How can you say you don't want rape anymore when physically everything you represent is the traditional relationship to men of the pretty object? It's not understanding the dynamics.

You need knowledge about your condition and history before you start doing plays about yourself: otherwise you will reproduce the conditions of oppression. The whole concept of what is beautiful in a woman has to be changed; the whole concept of strength in a woman has got to be created; and since it's theatre, it's got to be created physically. This is what I mean by creating a new mythology. There's an enormous mythology in the male world, and we are creating from nothing. The poverty of the representation of a woman in our world is disastrous. How can you possibly live and grow and feel and have an imagination under these conditions?

Joanne: What are some of the projects you're going to be working on in the future?

Pol: I'm writing a play about the power relationships among women. I'm not interested in saying "everything is beautiful and pretty because we're women and we're working together." I'm in-

terested in how power is distributed among women and the conflicts that can result from that. We've been brought up in a world where hierarchies exist, and just because we're women doesn't mean we're free from them. Nicole LeCavalier is also going to do a piece on desire in women (not just sexual desire) which is another concept which is absent from female mythology — *Les chants et rythmes du désir*. Desire is the thing that pushes you on. I mean, women are not supposed to have desires, except for maybe that one man in their lives. They're supposed to be passive and live inferior little lives.

We're also very interested in reinterpreting history. We're going to open the theatre up to women and ask them to present their heroine — not just women of the theatre. We're thinking of asking Lise Payette to do something.

Joanne: Do you see yourself working with men again?

Pol: Yes, eventually, but not soon. I really like the ground work we're doing now. I don't see myself as having to explain to anyone why it's important to work among women, or why we have to speak about rape, or whatever. I'm tired of explaining what I think to be an absolute necessity. For me, it's a basic fact to be accepted, and if that's not clear, well fuck it. But eventually in certain plays, in certain productions, you need men there doing something. I don't want them now, because if we're going to be logical with ourselves in working autonomously through collective creation, then men would have the same rights as everyone else. I don't want men's participation in that sense. First of all, because I know they wouldn't understand what we're doing. I don't want their orientation. But eventually we will be working from scripts, and I can see hiring a male actor to do a role that has been written.

Joanne: Do you think that the consciousness of men is changing?

Pol: I think that men have it so easy that it's difficult for them to want to destroy everything that's there and start anew. They always have a woman to fall back on. I'm sure that lots of men are aware that it's a terrible world, but there's always a woman there to mother them, to comfort and take care of them, and that compensates for a lot. Men are frightened and terrified of losing their sexual identity — "the strong man." They feel threatened. They have a right to feel threatened. When you've always been used to having someone below you, even though you love that person, it's so secure. I think men have a great deal of emotional security and women do not, and the few men who are aware of all this are very isolated and lonely.

I think that most men do not know how to deal with pain. When we had the split, one of the things Jean Pierre told me was that there were things happening in this theatre that he did not understand and that he did not *want* to understand. It's very honest, and I have a great deal of respect for that. What he was really saying to me was that it was because he did not want to deal with pain, and painful things were happening. Women are so used to pain, you know, what's a little bit more or less? We have no choice because we're in it, and they do have a choice. They can shut their eyes. If you're a man, and you're going to change, it's going to be horrible, and I don't think they're ready to do that. The only way that I think it's going to change is when the whole structure of romantic love — the couple — is destroyed. When you'll never be able to fall back on the loving relationship, then men will start to move their asses.

This interview was transcribed and edited with the assistance of Joanne Ransom.



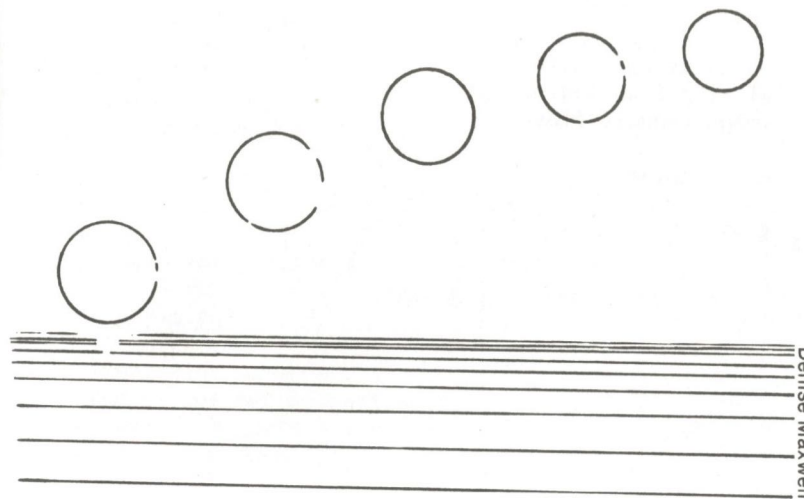
Anne Deguise

"Women are so used to pain, what's a little more or less?"

Neighbourhood Weather

Maria Kaufman

A mother's voice fills the street
with all the ways she cannot love her child.
Silence is like this. December sunlight
glides its small arc efficient as the moon;
we show ourselves by excess
the warm breath given up.
Three o'clock, school's out, time grows short.
A familiar defeat,
fear of darkness and something inhuman
ordinary as young winter laying us bare.



Denise Maxwell

h k bdqgp f #ffff S

Ellen Quigley

p ranks
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 freeze in the mind as
 light freezes image moving through
 the lens

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d is
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 p art of detail

g one movement

get off your horses & circles &
 ride off across the horizon

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 as open myth
 winding & unwinding fast
 image changes flash

k 1 movement

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o d i r e c t i o n
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 t s

the string unravels

b raking grass

the string makers used to
 b eat their flax & hemp with a toothed
 brake until particle fibred into
 f rags
 meant for recollision

re: collusion of p art
 reclusive beat on the brake drum
 k partial to
 stop you dead in you tracks
 no breaks here i'm riding out
 tide mark
 b i t
 e or
 water mouth weathering song
 in the ear ear you
 sound time

dark blue red feathers
 green ferns
 reeds &
 frayed cuffs
 up there the
 moon is feathering light

f s 1 movement

whether to feath or
 partickle it all out right
 b
 u-turn it out of here
 saint o p p s are
 st opps on patrol
 pulling up the road
 lurking around the corner
 b p g q k &
 d or of
 order

f jumps over the t quick &
 rides on into the field

quarter p rising
 katch if katch can
 white light wind water
 the sound of weathering continues
 to wear away the surface the
 circle is broken open



Some essential points about fish

Lynne Fernie

1. Ellen can't help it. She is drawing on all her resources in order to Carry On. She is washing the breakfast dishes and wiping the breakfast toast crumbs from the counter in her hand. The fish are hiding at the back of the tank and the Worm is hiding underneath a plastic log. He refuses to do His Job which is to eat the excrement of the fish. You might think he is On Strike, but he is not. He is afraid. Melon, the largest of the African Cichlids attacks him whenever he pokes his head out of the log. The Worm is a Kooli Loach; he is a Good Worker: he wants to eat shit. After all, his survival depends upon it.
2. The drawing on the livingroom wall was done with charcoal on paper. The paper is stark, white like a hospital wall. You can see that it has been custom made for the artist. There is a thick watermark in the bottom right hand corner.
3. Melon is, (of course), male. He dominates the other fish through aggression, especially Sarah, the smallest of the females. He Eats First, Mates First, and Chooses His Spot In The Tank Unchallenged. Ellen has often thought of killing him, of removing him from the tank and watching him flop nakedly on the table, round-eyed and glistening. However, she has not yet committed herself to this murder. She has a certain respect for dominance.

4. Fat black strokes filled the paper to the edges, threatening to burst onto the walls, escape from the thin aluminum frame. You could see that the paper was not large enough for the composition of the artist. You could see that It Never Would Be.

5. While Ellen is Carrying On, you will see that she has round eyes. Like the fish. Except for a pale grey pallor around these eyes, the resemblance to fish Ends There. She does not have gills nor does she live in water. But sometimes she feels that she is drowning. She definitely does not glisten.

6. Ellen is making her morning tea. It is 11:00 a.m. and her house is A Mess. The kettle boils anyway. The mess does not influence the kettle: it Does Its Job. You might think it is luckier than the Worm in its career selection, but think again. It is no fun getting That Hot. The kettle does not have a tan from the heat. Neither does Ellen. Her skin is white (like paper) and her hair is black (like charcoal).

7. Ellen is still Carrying On. It is now noon. She is preparing lunch for her kids. Her kids (three of them) do not look like fish, but sometimes she thinks they do. They are going to have Rice-A-Roni for lunch. They will also have approximately 8.6 fights about the size of their respective portions. They do not particularly care for Rice-A-Roni, but it's a Matter of Principle. Sometimes Ellen thinks of them as Melon, Sarah and Worm. Their real names are Bruce, Peggy and Brian. Bruce is (of course) a male. He also dominates. Ellen prefers not to make further comparisons between her children and the fish, but sometimes she can't help it. They slip into her mind while she is Carrying On.

8. The Man's head is bent backwards on the wall and his mouth is open in a thick black scream. The tendons of his neck are wide black strokes of charcoal highlighted with white chalk. He doesn't appear to be Doing Anything except screaming: that is His Job. If you think His Job is easy, try twisting your head backwards and screaming . . . and keep it there. White highlights do not make it easier.

9. Sometimes Ellen thinks of the Man as her husband. He is not. Her husband has never screamed in his life. He does not Believe In It. He is a Stoic which means he Suffers In Silence. This is not quite as bad as a Christian, but it is close. Ellen's husband has told her that Everyone should have A Job. She believes him. That is why she is Carrying On: it is Her Job.

10. Now it is 1:30 p.m. Ellen is washing the Rice-A-Roni off the wall: one of the 8.6 fights was messy. She wishes that her 3.0

children were fish she could keep contained in a tank. Sometimes she dreams of building one, but usually she suppresses the thought and is thankful that they are old enough to be in school. Fish are also in schools. The resemblance Almost Ends There.

11. The Man in the picture is middle-aged. His head is cut off by the boundaries of the paper. The artist must be quite cruel or else Fucked-Up. Whatever, the result is Quite Painful.

12. Ellen is staring at the fish in the tank. She has finished the dishes, vacuumed and put a load of kids' clothing in the washing machine. She is now watching Melon attack one of the younger male fish and wondering if fighting is His Job. All of a sudden Ellen makes A Decision: She is reaching into the tank . . . Her arms are In It up to the elbow . . . The fish are panicking, darting back and forth like women gone crazy . . . She notices that her fingers resemble fat white fish.

13. The Man in the picture is still screaming. It is difficult to tell if it is In Horror or Just Routine. It is difficult to tell if he is watching the murder from the corners of his chalk-highlighted eyes or still staring sightlessly toward some point near the top of the opposite wall.

14. Ellen is standing by the fish tank with Melon wriggling in her closed palm. She is staring at the picture on the wall trying to decide if the Man Imprisoned Within It is watching her. She decides that he probably is, but It Does Not Matter. She opens her hand and looks at Melon, who has stopped squirming and now lies small and impotent in her palm. Her eyes are growing as round and slow as the eyes of the Fish.

15. Slowly and deliberately Ellen brings her Hand Up to her round black mouth and sucks Melon into it. We can imagine how he slides down her throat, as easily as silver. She swallows once, and then slyly smiles at the Man in the Picture, a smile which spreads to a thin enormous grin. The grin widens and resembles the mouth of a Fish. The Man in the Picture continues to scream.

16. Ellen can't help it. She is humming to herself while she unloads the laundry from the Machine. She is trying not to think of the resemblance of the Man on the Wall to her Husband, or of Melon to her Eldest Son. She is trying not to think at all but she can't stop: Sometimes, she hums, Decisions are necessary in order to Carry On.

Sky-falling for Henny-Penny

Polly Fleck

'home' is a four-letter word
ersatz a facsimile for a real
word. No 'right' word rhymes with 'home'
'come' should but it doesn't 'roam'
rhymes and it shouldn't
language is "off-true", out-of-joint, Jehovah
keeps his real name secret. Poets lie.

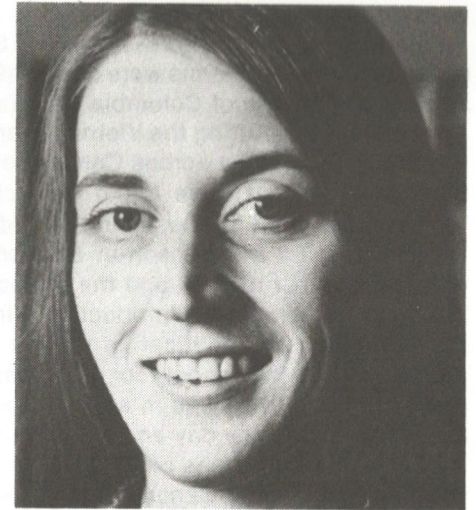
'dome' rhymes 'home'
of many-coloured glass, that patch of
blue we prisoners call the sky.
dome king-dome mind dome-minion.

Island prison called 'Syntax', the Sea
of Id off the coast of
continental Reason confined to think straight
we
countermine the dungeon with soundalikes
unreasonable illuminating
'poetry' is whatever graphiti the walls
allow: tapped out chiselled in, not decoded.

Someday a poet playing out his line to sound
truth and lie about his catch will say real
words and the Jerico-built walls
will come down and the unsupported dome will
tumble
heaven down around our ears
willy-nilly Henny-penny
sky-falling is home-coming
and poets will lie still

Kathryn Shaw:

**In conversation
with Constance
Brissenden**



Kathryn Shaw, at 32, is artistic director of Westcoast Actors, a job she's held since October 1978. As one of a healthy handful of women working successfully as directors in Vancouver, (a group that includes the New Play Centre's Pamela Hawthorne, Carousel Theatre's Elizabeth Ball and freelance director Jane Heyman) Shaw briefly discusses why women have more opportunities on the coast, and describes how she first began directing. She is speaking with Constance Brissenden. Constance writes about the theatre and other things, and is editor of seven anthologies of Canadian plays. Currently, she is working for the Writers' Development Trust editing a resource guide to Canadian plays.

Women fill prominent jobs in the theatre. In administration. In costuming. As actors. As box-office managers. As publicists. It's a familiar litany. Without us the theatre couldn't tie its own shoelaces, much less sell a season's subscription. But the harsh reality of our contributions is that, although we have power, rarely do we hold the reins. Particularly the artistic ones. And for women eyeing less traditional functions — the "men's roles" of designers, directors and playwrights — the career path may look as treacherous as a skateboard ride down Mount Everest.

Shaw: Out here things have been a little easier for women directors. Perhaps it's because of the lifestyle . . . Vancouver, the west coast, has always seemed more open to new ideas and less likely to slot people. That includes women. After all, women basically started theatre in Vancouver — Yvonne Firkins founded the *Arts Club*, Joy Coghill was artistic director of the *Playhouse* — women directors have always been in the forefront, always. People here

have different ways of seeing things.

I started directing because I'd always been interested in it — and because my student loans were due. In 1972, I'd been working as an actress, a graduate of Columbia University School of Fine Arts in New York. It was during the Vietnam war and I wanted to get out of the States, so I wrote across Canada for work as an actress. I had been thinking that there might be a chance to work for Paxton Whitehead at the *Playhouse* but that didn't happen and I got a call instead from Ed Stephenson at *Bastion Theatre* in Victoria. That was the summer of 1972 and the project was a political review, a LIP grant "experimental" production. Since my reasons for leaving the U.S. were semi-political as well as semi-personal, I accepted the job. After a fall school tour with *Bastion*, I moved to Vancouver and by March 1973 I was in a lunch hour musical comedy at *City Stage*. An actress by day and a waitress by night.

That's when my loans came due. Money became a priority. So I wrote, again, across Canada and the western U.S. and ended up getting two bites. University of Ottawa wanted me but because I was an American: it wasn't possible for me to work there. So I taught at California State College in Turlock for a year and that's where I started directing.

I'd always been interested in it, even as an undergraduate. I'd briefly considered going on to graduate school to study directing but decided I was philosophically opposed — I believe you can be a better director by learning about acting and how the theatre works. Directing courses are a waste of time. You need to find out first if you're a theatre person — make costumes, move scenery, run lights, act. So that you know what the whole production of theatre is. Put yourself in a position to learn that.

So people come up through stage management, but I think it's more important to know how an actor works. If you yourself act to start, you get training from within; you don't lay what you learned from books on top.

This is a very personal point of view. There are some good directors who came out of an academic background — Pam Hawthorne, who graduated from Yale, is a good example. But it should be a practical programme, not an academic one. There should be a balance. You've got to read literature and know about history, but you've got to find the right balance.

What other assets are important for a director? She must be able to conceptualize — and a degree of organization is quite necessary. You've got to be able to take charge and then be responsible for whatever decisions you make.

I'm a determined person and directing was something I'd always wanted to do. Someone not as straightforward might not be able to do it. In my case, I had no choice. Theatre is the only thing I wanted to do in my life.

Fireweed Ourstory

Throughout the past two and a half years a number of women have been instrumental in the publication of FIREWEED. These women joined the Fireweed Collective as full-time members and each brought to the journal her unique talents, special concerns and willingness to work in all the areas involved in publishing. Each wanted to ensure that women's ideas and creative work would not be swallowed in the silence of non-communication. Because FIREWEED is not owned or run by a large corporation, its tone and content naturally reflects not only the manuscripts and material which are spontaneously submitted, but the ideas and concerns of the individual women working on it. FIREWEED is, therefore, and will continue to be a journal in the process of continual change and growth as collective members leave and new women bring their ideas and energy into the shaping of an issue. This section, entitled *Fireweed Ourstory*, is intended to keep you in touch with the women working on FIREWEED — to introduce new members and acknowledge and thank those who leave.

Leaving the Collective:

Our love and thanks to the following women for their tremendous work and caring:

Gay Allison who initially founded FIREWEED, gathered together the women on the original Collective, worked as a full-time member

on Issues 1 through 3/4 and on the ideas, manuscript solicitation and editorial committee for Issue 5/6. Her special belief in the capabilities of women and her personal warmth, inspiration and hard work in every area of the journal literally made the publication of FIREWEED possible.

Elizabeth Brady joined the collective for the publication of Issues 2 through 5/6. Through her organizational genius, invaluable editorial skills, ideas and enthusiasm, she made an immense contribution to each issue as well as taking on the extra work and responsibility of managing editor of Issue 5/6 on women and language.

Hilda Kirkwood, a founding member of the Collective, worked on Issues 1 through 3/4. With her editorial skills and input as well as insight, breadth of knowledge, patience and wise sense of humour throughout the founding months of FIREWEED and the often tumultuous editorial and production meetings, she brought her love of people and scholarship to the journal.

Charlene Sheard, a founding member of the Collective, worked as a full-time collective member from Issues 1 through 3/4. Drawing on diverse experience from her participation in many women's organizations, she devoted an immense amount of time and energy to the organization of the two Fireweed Festivals at Harborfront in 1978 and 1979.

The Collective Now:

Lynne Fernie, a writer and visual artist, is a founding member of FIREWEED who has seen the journal through every issue so far. Without Lynne's rare combination of design, editorial and administrative skills FIREWEED would not be what it is today. Lynne has also brought to the journal a heightened sense of collective action. She has permanently altered the image banks of all she worked with through her inexplicable passion for epic dinosaurs and camels of all description.

Rina Fraticelli, a writer, poet and associate dramaturge with Factory Theatre Lab joined the collective as a full-time member with Issue 3/4. Her collective and feminist experiences in Montreal have brought links with Quebec feminists, and her involvement with the Canadian theatre is visible in FIREWEED's sponsorship of the National Women's Playwriting Competition and the themes of Issues 7 and 8.

Sandy Hellard, an experienced graphic designer and layout artist, helped with production of Issue 1 and 2 and joined the collective as a full-time member with Issue 3/4. Her wit, wisdom, sanity and skill with recalcitrant galleys sustains the whole collective through the frantic production times and ensures that FIREWEED goes to press with its margins straight.

Joss MacLennan, an artist and commercial illustrator and designer, joined the collective as a full time member with Issue 5/6. Her irreverent sense of humour, passion for cycling and astute feminist sensibility as well as her expertise in design has resulted in the new look of FIREWEED from Issue 7. She is currently collaborating on a special project *The Bride Show: Homemakers in Training*.

Denise Maxwell, an artist, nocturnal flourisher and visual designer, joined the collective as a full time member with this Issue. Her skill and patience in production have helped keep us going, and her good sense, head, and heart will no doubt keep us afloat.

Rhea Tregebov, a poet and freelance editor, recently landed in Toronto from Boston and joined the collective as a full time member with Issue 3/4. Her editorial skills, sanity in the face of continual financial disaster, objectivity when dealing with problems which arise and superb baking abilities bring an essential flavour to the collective and assures attendance at collective meetings. Her 'Anatomy Alphabet Poems' ms. is awaiting fame and fortune in the Big City.

Acknowledgements

The members of the FIREWEED Collective would like to express our appreciation and special thanks to the following individuals who willingly and enthusiastically offered their time and talent in the publication of this issue.

Connie Brissenden for her help in shaping this issue, writing and soliciting manuscripts and for her ongoing assistance with FIREWEED's National Women's Playwriting Competition.

Sheilagh Crandall for her patient and generous editing and transcribing assistance.

Robin Endres and **Kate Lushington** for their support and inspiration in the shaping of this issue.

Catherine Macleod for generously offering her ideas, work and continuing advice with publicity for our fundraising events.

Eugene Shaw for her editorial assistance and her contribution to planning stages of Issues 7 & 8.

Rhea Tregebov for transcribing long and arduous taped interviews.

And a warm and special thanks to our Associate Members who have given of their time, resources and spirit in all areas of publication of this issue: **Debbie Bloomfield**: subscription, book distribution and fundraising; **Carol Gibson**: market and financial research and distribution; **Pam Godfree**: fundraising and production; **Eddie Hoffman**: editorial work, subscriptions and distribution; **Anne Lyons**: subscription and promotion.

FIREWEED also wishes to acknowledge donations from the following people: **Robin Endres**, **Maureen Harris**, **Ruth Koski Harris**, **Ann Jones** and **Sandy Muir**, as well as the donations in kind to the Fireweed office from our ever-faithful Associate Members and Advisory Board.

Contributors' Notes

Kay Armatage is a filmmaker, teacher and writer currently living in Toronto. **Constance Brissenden** is the editor of several anthologies of Canadian plays. **Margaret Dragu** is a performer in film, theatre, dance, and video. She is currently preparing for a new work based on Susan Swan's stories, *The Northerners*. **Robin Belitsky Endres** is a Toronto playwright. **Lynne Fernie** is a writer and visual artist and a founding member of FIREWEED.

Polly Fleck is a graduate student in Medieval Studies at the University of Western Ontario; her work has appeared in *Fiddlehead*, *Waves* and *Canadian Author and Bookman*. **Martha Fleming**, video director of Art Metropole, is an editor of *Fuse* magazine and a freelance writer and curator. **Joanne Gormley** is an actor and member of the Montreal Improvisational Theatre who recently appeared in Toronto with the Company's production of *Scat*. **Maria Kaufman** is a poet living in the North End of Boston who teaches poetry to the masses. **Nina Levitt** is a recent graduate of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute.

Denise Maxwell is the newest member of the FIREWEED Collective. **Diane Michaels** is the stage name of Mary Johnson, the president of the Canadian Association of Burlesque Entertainers (CABE) who recently became the only woman executive of the Canadian Labour Congress in Ontario. **Nightwood Theatre** is a Toronto theatre collective which develops original theatre pieces. Mary Vingoe, Kim Renders, Maureen White and Cynthia Grant are the group's core members. **Pol Pelletier** is a Montreal theatre artist and founding member of Theatre experimentale des femmes. **Lyse Ponton** teaches at Dawson College in Montreal.

Susan Poteet is a Montreal writer and teacher, and a regular contributor to FIREWEED. **Ellen Quigley**, a Toronto area poet, has been published in the *Laomedon Review* and *CVII*. **Mama Quilla II** is an all-woman Toronto-based collectively organized rock 'n roll band which recently appeared at the Champaign Women's Music Festival. **Joanne Ransom** is a writer living in Montreal with her two children. **Erika Ritter**, a playwright currently living in Toronto, has had a recent success with her comedy, *Automatic Pilot*.

Katharine Shaw is artistic director of Westcoast Actors. **Lisa Steele**, an editor of *Fuse* magazine, is also a video and performing artist. **Lorraine Segato** is a Toronto filmmaker and musician who recently appeared at the Champaign Festival of Women's Music with Mama Quilla II. **Betsy Warland** is a Toronto poet and initiator of the Women's Writing Collective which spawned, among other things, FIREWEED. She recently received an Ontario Arts Council writing grant.

Errata

The FIREWEED Collective wishes to extend apologies to Ellen Quigley for the misprint of her poem on pages 68 and 69 of Issue 5/6. It is reproduced in its entirety on pages 98 and 99.

The Collective also apologizes to Vivian Sturdee, whose photograph on page 159 of Issue 5/6 illustrated the Joan Barfoot interview without proper credit.

The Collective wishes to point out an error in our masthead of Issue 5/6; Gay Allison's name should have appeared under the Editorial Committee and not the Fireweed Collective. FIREWEED is grateful for her editorial contribution to Issue 5/6 and regrets the error in production which caused this misprint.



**Forthcoming: Issue 8
Women and Performance, Part II
Issue 9 Bread and Roses**

Fireweed is a feminist journal dedicated to publishing a wide range of women's work: • the arts • politics • ideology • herstory • lesbian feminism • book reviews • interviews • visual art • photography

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- Excerpts from **Erika Ritter's Automatic Pilot**
- **Lisa Steele**, Video Performance
- Interview with **Kay Armatage**, feminist filmmaker
- Photograms by **Nina Levitt**
- **Mama Quilla II**, Toronto's all women rock and roll band
- Interview with **Diane Michaels**, President of the Canadian Association of Burlesque Entertainers
- The **True Story of The True Story of Ida Johnson**, plus scenes from the play
- Interview with **Pol Pelletier**
- New poetry by **Polly Fleck**, **Maria Kaufman**, **Betsy Warland**

The cover shows a scene from Nightwood Theatre's
The True Story of Ida Johnson.